AN: Not bothering with a disclaimer. It's on my profile page. Please note that this chapter's length is not indicative of future lengths-that's why it's a prologue.

But before we do start, I just wish to give credit to Minstrel Knight, whose work, "Tyrant," is the prime influence for this story. I only hope that this story can live up to its spiritual predecessor.

EDIT: Please note that this story follows a non-linear timeline. This chapter is the prologue, but could also pass off as the epilogue. Subsequent chapters will deal with the events that led to this chapter.

Edinburgh, August 2015

The night sky loomed over the Scottish city, its darkness seemingly encompassing all. Yet, amidst the streets of Edinburgh, fiery torches ran through the middle, illuminating figures marching in uniform step, their silent faces shadowed by the brims of their metallic helmets.

And soon, Edinburgh was no longer in the dark, but awash in flame as the uniformed figures made their way through the city, unrelenting, pitiless, and silent but for the sound of their boots hitting the stone and concrete ground.

The city was in ruins, there was nothing that could be done about that. This once glorious testament to Scottish and British engineering and prosperity now played the part of graveyard as the tides of war brought it to its knees.

The figures stopped at several intervals, their fiery torches serving to light the way as they moved to occupy the buildings to their sides. They required rest, for the next day would bring more blood, misery, and steel.

The sight at Holyrood Palace was different. A veritable mob of fire-lit figures had assembled before it, cheering and chanting as the eight-pointed star over the Union Jack was raised from the mast. Across the street, an even greater mob had assembled before the Parliament, symbol of their great hatred towards their Albion enemies, and eagerly awaited the sign.

None were aware of the woman in Holyrood Palace, who diligently began to chronicle the events that had led them to this great day.

Scratching feverishly, a pen streaked its way across the dull, brownish paper of the weathered diary, the author's thoughts taking material form in the form of letters and words.

Some men…live simple lives. They sleep, they eat, they breed, they love, they work, and then, at the end of the day, they sleep once more.

Others, however, possess a fire within them that threatens to engulf the whole world.

I do not claim to understand when it was that the fire within our Emperor first burned—perhaps he had always had it, destined from birth to change the world around him to his image; to crush his enemies in the earth, the mud, and snow.

But even destiny can use a little help…

Or even, perhaps, a war.

The so-called New Order had fallen in a tide of blood and misery. Reddish liquid streaked the cobblestones and cement roads of London and most of the English countryside as the nation tore itself apart at the seams. It was a time of chaos.

A time…of opportunity.

For the first time in what seemed like ages, class and social standing mattered no more as the very order of society fell into disarray, its leaders dead and rotting. A man, at last, could be whatever he wished, if only he could weather the storm! A soldier could become a noble! A peasant, a king!

But to understand our times, we must never forget our past.

Yes, we must never forget the past that our Emperor, our glorious leader, has led us out of.

Decades of war had ravaged Europe and the world. By the end of the forties, Europe had pulled the world into two global wars that left

millions dead. In the decades that followed, wars raged on every continent, in a seemingly unstoppable wave of violence and hatred based no more on race, but on thought.

But then, in 1991, everything changed as the Soviet Union fell, and peace, however brief, was had.

To our great misfortune, however, peace was too late. The peoples of the world had seen so much death, had dealt it too often to be able to carry on normally in a time of peace. Paranoia was still endemic, and conflict seemed to bring out an instinctual need to inflict violence rather than demand for reasonable compromise.

In France, hatred for the crimes of the Germans fuelled such distrust that neither side could tolerate each other well enough for constructive negotiations.

In Italy, the ravages of war left the nation broken-spirited and shamed for having supported the fascist Mussolini, even if it was decades ago.

In Russia, once a global superpower, the collapse of its nation in 1991 drew the large country into a severe economic downturn, the likes of which no other country has ever seen.

In Spain, the flames of war were fanned higher still as the vile Franco was killed and democracy restored, only to find out that Franco's successors were much more persuasive than he was.

It was not a question of whether there would be war or not, but when.

Our Emperor put a stop to all that. But then, he is the Emperor, and he is mighty.

Perhaps it would serve best, then, if I were to chronicle that great man's achievements. I, who have stood at his side for most of his life…I understand him; or, at least, as much as any man can truly understand another human being. I have served my Emperor faithfully, and he has rewarded me with his trust, and thus the story of his life—one of the most cherished possessions I can claim.

For, as the Emperor himself has said, "those who possess knowledge of the past understand the flow of the present." An apt

statement that is to be expected of a graduate in History from Oxford University.

Allow me to start from the beginning, then…

The author stopped her writing, looking up as the doors to the room were pushed open by soldiers on the other side, and quickly got to her feet and saluted as the object of her admiration came into view. She was not alone in the act, as every other officer in the room nearly fell over themselves trying to show as much respect as was due to the great man they followed.

The Emperor, a mere man of average height, jade eyes, and raven-coloured hair, was by no means an imposing figure in terms of physical intimidation. But why should he be so? What purpose would it serve for this man to intimidate his subordinates, who followed him out of adoration and respect? Intimidation was the tool of the tyrant, not the enlightened monarch.

This did not mean they did not fear his wrath—for all creatures who treaded the world did. What they did not fear, however, was the threat of him arbitrarily punishing them for misdeeds that were not theirs. He was a fair man, they knew, and thus they trusted him with their lives.

The Emperor's every step into the room seemed to go in tandem with a heartbeat, his jade eyes sweeping over the room, taking in all the sights of the redecorated room, where his enemies would have once congregated and debated how best to defeat him. A sly smile made its way on his face at the thought.

In the middle of the room, he stopped his trek, still capturing the attention of everyone in the room—none of them unimportant people, all of them officers in their own right.

Invitingly, he lifted his arms to his sides. "My friends; please, sit."

Given permission, the officers did so, as though it were an order. Only those who could not find chairs remained standing.

"We are, at last, on the last great leg of our journey of nearly a decade in the making," he spoke with clear eloquence. "For seven years, we have practically fought non-stop as our enemies lined up

for a chance to take us down…but here we are, and here they are not."

"Our enemies are many," he continued, before a sly smirk graced his features. "But our equals are none. Who remembers when, beneath the olive trees and in the vineyards they said, Spain could not be humbled?"

The crowd of officers tittered around the author, and she herself had to hide her mouth behind her gloved hand to hide her smile.

"Who remembers when, in their gilded halls and coffee shops, that France could not be tamed?"

The titter grew louder, and the author nearly slapped herself when a giggle made it through her treacherous mouth. Everyone was trying so hard to appear disciplined before the Emperor, but the memories he was eliciting, combined with the irony of their situation, made it hard to repress the humour.

The Emperor did not seem oblivious to this, and the smirk grew to a sly smile. "And who among us here, remembers when, in their halls of steel and glass, they said, Europe could not be conquered?" He watched as the titter died out, the grim and proud reality of what they had achieved now foremost in their minds.

The author felt her own chest swell with pride, her blue, gala officer uniform pressing against her breasts, as the uniforms were not made for such movement. But what cared she if her least noticeable assets were so enhanced? None in the room would be able to tell, so absorbed were they in the Emperor's speech.

"Now?" the Emperor mused. "Now, they say nothing. They fear us, my friends—fear us as a force of nature; dealers in thunder, death, and misery! No enemy that has stood before us has ever remained intact, and no enemy we have taken in has ever remained broken!" he raised a clenched fist before his face, the line of sight resulting in the fist coming between the Emperor and his view of the Parliament building outside. It was an apt gesture.

"They say I am a monster…a dictator hiding underneath the skin of a liberator," he then said, his eyes becoming sorrowful and eliciting muted cries of outrage from the author and her surrounding

colleagues. Their desire to comfort their leader was quickly brushed aside, however, as they then became filled with burning determination. "But I say they are misguided! I say they are the ones who are blind! I say…"

His arms spread once more, as though presenting himself to a theatre audience. The gesture and the cliffhanger left the author breathless. Slowly, the Emperor made his way to the balcony, the officers in the room slowly crowding behind him as he gazed down at the cheering masses of his soldiers, their very appearance by the firelight frightening to behold.

"…I…am Henry. I. Am. EMPEROR."

The announcement needed no enhancement to be heard by anyone in the immediate vicinity. The deafening cheers were enough to tell the author that all present had heard it. She was, herself, clapping thunderously, her hands hurting from the strength of each clap, but she did not care. This was the Emperor: the man who had brought Europe to its knees and then rebuilt it stronger than ever before.

Then, with deliberate slowness, the Emperor raised a finger and pointed towards the Parliament building across the street. Two words left his mouth then, resonating with power and a demand for obedience. He needn't have bothered—the cheers afterwards belied the enthusiasm of his troops to follow the order.

"Burn it."

Post-AN: To ensure maximum understanding of the political situation at the beginning of "Emperor," allow me to outline a few changes in human history that are relevant to the development of the geopolitical situation in this story.

1. After World War II, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was never formed in 1952 owing to the failure of Robert Schuman and his colleagues in convincing the French government to cooperate with the Germans. As a result, neither Luxembourg, Belgium, nor Holland attempted to form the covenant with West Germany in order to not piss off their French neighbours.

2. As a result of the failure of the ECSC to form, the European Communities were not formed either, and the Western, democratic

world was kept in check primarily due to American pressure on its allies to behave.

3. In Spain, the government of Francisco Franco was toppled a good ten years before it did in real life, via the assassination of Franco and the rapid democratization of the state with the help of American and British armed forces. As a result of these foreign presences, a massive backlash in ultranationalism erupted throughout the state, though for the rest of the Cold War, these did not even attempt to get into power, merely bidding their time and spreading their propaganda.

4. Italy, having never been part of the ECSC, took a lot longer to recover from World War II, as did Germany. As a result, France is the dominant industrial and economic power at the fall of the Soviet Union, but neither Germany nor Italy possess good relations with France.

5. The loss of India in 1947 and the subsequent decolonization movements around the world left Britain vastly underpowered, and as a result of the failure of the European integration systems to form, it has bullheadedly pushed itself back onto its feet via a mix of planned capitalism and socialism (ala India's Five-Year Plans). Furthermore, with Europe still so harshly divided, it was rebuilt its military force such that when Argentina tried to invade the Falklands in the 1980s, it wasn't even necessary to send a fleet, as the standing garrison and fleet had been buffed up so much that the Argentine forces failed to overwhelm them.

6. As a result of British militarization, Northern Ireland is little more than a military state at this point, and the IRA have failed to hurt the British much in what today would be the remarkably effective "Irish Troubles."

Hope the overview helps a bit. Look forward to the next chapter!

As always, review!

-MB

United Kingdom, August 10th, 1980…

The sound of flesh hitting wood resonated within the room that served as the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, thoroughly shocking the occupants therein.

Up to now, the audience in the room had been patiently listening to the briefing their leader, Albus Dumbledore, had been giving them on the Order of the Phoenix's agenda for the next few weeks. It was, all things considered, a rather banal occurrence, and yet the moment that Dumbledore hit the topic of secluding the Longbottoms and Potters into secure, hidden safe-houses, James Potter had protested, but with such force that many wondered whether or not there was more to this move than the venerable mage had told them about.

"Are you kidding me, Dumbledore?" asked James through grit teeth. "First, you dare drop that…that…bomb on Lily and I moments after our son is born, and now this?"

Dumbledore's gaze was impassive, as was his tone. "I appreciate that you did not reveal more than you should have, James," the older man said evenly. "But this is not the time to put yourself above the public interest."

"Screw the public interest!" James all but screamed, once again shocking the people around him, some of which had even taught him in his youth, and others had been his co-students. "Just let me take Lily and Harry out of the country like we suggested and we'll be safer than in some safe-house!"

Dumbledore's eyes had a strange, hard glint in them that did not sit well with James. "And who will protect you if no one knows where you are?" he asked right back. "Do you think the enemy will cease looking for you? Do you really underestimate their zeal that much, James?"

"Yes, because our safe-houses have had such a stellar record," snarked James. "Remember the McKinnons? Weren't they supposed to be safe?"

There were gasps in the room as James dealt what many considered to be a low blow, especially considering that Dumbledore had himself guaranteed the safety of the victims, moments prior to their murder.

It was a testament to the old mage's self-restraint and his irritation that he visibly narrowed his eyes—an action that was typically reserved only for those he duelled. "We rooted out that spy," he reminded James, carefully drawing out his words such that his anger would not flow into his tone. "There should be no more leaks."

James was not to be browbeaten, however. "Should be is not good enough," he snapped back. "Not when my family is on the line. Remember what I told you when I joined?"

Dumbledore sighed. Why was the Potter patriarch acting so difficult? Couldn't he see there was more at stake than his family? "I remember. You would be loyal to the Order to the day you die, unless its interests went directly against the wellbeing of your family."

James nodded once firmly, ignoring the muttering behind his back as he focused all his attention on Dumbledore. "That's right. Now, tell me Dumbledore, am I going to have to take the Unbreakable Vow, or will you reconsider letting us leave the country?"

"Is there no room for compromise?" asked Dumbledore wearily, knowing that James taking the Vow would only happen if he quit the order. The same would then have to be applied to Lily. "My sources tell me that Voldemort—" he patently ignored the flinches and muted screams, silently proud of the fact that James' own reaction had dimmed to a barely noticeable twitch in his left shoulder. "is at the moment keeping an eye on all avenues of exit for the country. Any attempts to flee would result in his immediate tip-off."

James glared. "…How long did you wait to use that excuse?" he asked angrily.

Dumbledore stared James down. "It is not an excuse, James, but cold fact. Convenient to myself or not, it is what is happening; thanks to the instability on the continent, the Muggle authorities have stepped up their immigration security measures, which just makes it

easier for Voldemort to monitor them with little manpower while he has the bulk of his spies checking on the magical transport hubs."

James grit his teeth. It didn't seem like he was going to secure a way out of the country for Lily, Harry, and he, but damned if he wasn't going to try to get this situation done on his terms! Trust the old man as he did to lead the war effort against Voldemort, he was less trusting with regards to his family's wellbeing.

"Fine. What do you offer as a compromise?" finally asked James.

Dumbledore reached for a drawer in his desk and pulled out a stack of papers. "Go over these with Lily—they're houses we put bids on for later use as safe-houses, but haven't finalized the transactions. Thus, no one should know about them—our side or theirs. Pick three, let me know, and that'll be your safe house," he proposed, before glancing at the quiet figure of Frank Longbottom and nodding at him. "When you're done, please pass them onto Frank so he and Alice can do the same."

James looked down at the papers in his hands, noting the obscuring charm on them that would hide their contents from any peepers. It was a good deal, all things considered, but…

"I want the Fidelius," he spoke up then, an unflinching stare directed at his old Headmaster. Years ago, such bullheadedness before the powerful mage would have been laughable. Now, everyone could feel the strength of James' determination.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "That would delay the occupation of the safe-house considerably. The Fidelius is no easy spell to cast and requires many preparations."

James shrugged. "Nonetheless, if you want us to stay in the country, we'll need the Fidelius as a guarantee," he said stubbornly. He wasn't about to take the same odds the McKinnons did. They were dead, and he was not. He was personally invested in making sure that would stay that way. "If not, Lily and I will take our chances and take Harry with us to Europe."

"James, Europe is practically on the verge of war every passing day," Arthur Weasley, one of the newer recruits into the Order

(ironically, though, not among its youngest) reminded him. "How would going there be safer?"

James was stubborn, however. "Europe's magical communities have made it clear they want nothing to do with V-Voldemort," he mentally cursed himself for stuttering at the name, though noted that it was infinitely better than screaming or damn near fainting, as he saw his colleagues doing. "So with a little bit of money, a few favours cashed in, we'd be incognito without any problems."

Dumbledore, however, was not about to let James take that chance. Even if, as James had told him he believed, the prophecy was "a load of crock," he wasn't about to take any chances—not when the Magical World's very stability lay in the balance. Thus, he was forced to agree with the compromise. "Very well, you'll get the Fidelius," he said wearily, wishing that the Potters would be more reasonable. Now he had to vacate his schedule for the next two weeks if he was going to be able to set up the Fidelius appropriately. Noticing Frank's anxious look, Dumbledore sighed as he mentally corrected himself and mentally noted to himself to vacate the next four weeks in his schedule. "Yes, Frank, you'll be getting the Fidelius too."

James had a triumphant look on his face as he wormed out the promise from Dumbledore, nodding back at Frank when the man looked at him gratefully. No matter what happened, he would not let his family become pawns in this war. On his honour as a Potter.

"Now, if that's all, James, may we continue with the meeting?" asked Dumbledore, who was decidedly not happy with the fact that they had been derailed to this extent. At James' nod, Dumbledore sighed quietly in relief and arranged his expression back into its grandfatherly persona. "Excellent. Now then, about team deployments for the next week…"

United Kingdom, January 6th, 1981…

There was the sound of a door opening and then closing.

"Lily, I'm home!" James all but shouted, instantly regretting it when he heard his infant son burst out crying somewhere on the second floor.

Sure enough, Lily came down the flight of stairs with a crying Harry cradled in her arms, her usually beautiful face marred with a glare she directed at her husband. "He had just gotten to sleep, you berk!"

James held up his hands in surrender, knowing full well when to cut his losses. "Sorry! It's just…been a long day…wasn't thinking!"

Lily's glare softened slightly, but did not go away, even as she rocked baby Harry gently in her arms. "Damn right you weren't thinking!" she reprimanded him, her voice softer as she continued to try to get her son to sleep. So far, it was working. A glance down told her his eyes had begun drooping, so she took her chances and looked back up at her husband, her unsaid query in her eyes.

James sighed. "No good," he told her regretfully, motioning to the Muggle newspaper underneath his armpit. "Looks like the situation in Europe's just getting worse all the time. Even with that new bloke leading the Russkies trying to get all chummy with the Yanks, it's like the rest of Europe just doesn't care."

Lily sighed. Ever since they had gone into hiding, James had continuously and determinedly kept up his queries into the situation in Europe, looking for the moment when the immigration policies would soften up and he could smuggle his family out by posing as Muggles. So far, however, nothing had loosened up. In fact, if she didn't know any better, she might have believed someone was deliberately trying to keep the European continent as fractured as possible, judging by the daily worsening of relations between the continental nations.

Still, this would require some discussion. So, giving James a familiar look, she went back upstairs and tucked in Harry in his crib before coming back down and finding her husband already plopped onto his favourite couch. With almost routine grace, she quietly made her way to his side and sat down, taking one of his rugged hands into her own and setting it on her lap.

"It's frustrating," James then said, after a moment of silence between the two. "It's like, even with all the money and power my folks had, I can't use any of it to protect you two," he confessed.

"James…" she started, but was held up by a squeeze of his hand.

"I know, I know," he told her with a wry grin. "I'm being too hard on myself, right?"

Silently, she nodded, giving him a sly smile in return. "Hard to believe I'm being predictable to James Potter," she teased him. "I still remember the days when you would get all tongue tied and confused around me."

James laughed, though he kept it low to avoid waking Harry up. While a silencing spell would have solved the issue of soundproofing that room, they both agreed that it would pose a security risk as well. "I remember," he confirmed, grinning fondly up at the ceiling at the memories. "I guess after Severus accidentally let it slip how he felt about you…I just knew I had to shape up, since he had a leg up on me and all."

Lily's smile dropped a little at the memory of her estranged best friend. "Those were…better days," she said softly.

James kept his eyes on the ceiling, his own expression turning nostalgic. "Yeah…better days."

"Still, I can't believe I actually got you to call Severus by his actual name, rather than that childish nickname Sirius made up."

"Oi, Snivellus was a great nickname!"

Somewhere else, a pale, hook-nosed man sneezed and felt his urge to kill annoying pranksters rise considerably.

United Kingdom, July 31st, 1981…

Lily sighed sadly as she watched her husband play with their now one-year-old son. Under normal circumstances, she would have made the day a grand occasion, possibly by inviting her son's playmates and their parents over, and even cooking up a true feast. As it was, however, they had only received short visits from Sirius, Remus, Peter, and Dumbledore before they had all left—each at separate intervals and through different means, so as to divert attention.

While the Fidelius could hide a home to the furthest extent of magic, it could also be circumvented, given enough patience and tracking.

In such an occasion, it would not be impossible to simply lay waste to the entire area and, by association, land a hit on the house. As such, it was protocol for all visits to happen sparingly, and each visit to last only a short amount of time, resulting in their current lack of guests for this otherwise happy occasion.

James, for his part, had coped well with the isolation, despite being an incredibly social creature. Between occupying himself with looking for ways to smuggle his family out of the country and taking care of his wife and infant son, he was as content as he could be, barring constant association with his friends. Lily could not begrudge his constant presence in the house, either—James Potter, if nothing else, was a loyal man devoted to his family.

Still, it was these times that made her question her attachment to the Magical World. How hard would it be to simply…stop being a mage? James was extremely adaptable, as she'd soon found out after their graduation from Hogwarts, so the transition, while momentarily rocky, would not be too strenuous. Harry could even go to a normal school, make normal friends, live a normal life…

It was always at this point that she would then sigh and wake up from her daydreaming, so to speak. The odds of them doing any such thing were remote, if not impossible. As long as Voldemort still ran around, the threat of her son getting attacked by some crazed madman would haunt them forever. Voldemort would have to be buried six feet under for her to ever consider such a life.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Lily twitched slightly as James' voice broke through her deep internal monologue. Apparently, from what she could see, little Harry—now back in his crib—had fallen asleep again, probably from all the excitement he'd built up from playing with his father. James, for his part, recognized the look on her face instantly—he wore it himself on most bad days.

Still, he let her talk it out for herself. It would be cathartic that way. With a patient look, he waited until she began talking, and then held her comfortingly as she released her frustrations into his chest, deliberately ignoring the moistness that was growing there from her tears.

Why couldn't he do more for them? Was he not the Potter patriarch—one of the most wealthy and politically powerful men of Magical Britain? In his father's time, he could have ordered a small squad of professional hitmen to take care of anyone who made Lily cry, but now, that was impossible. Between the fact that one would have to be near suicidal, or damn stupid to attack Voldemort head-on, it was unlikely that the situation could be resolved using his age-old family contacts.

So incapacitated, James did the next best thing he could to provide comfort for his wife and just held her as she quietly sobbed into his chest. Silently, he vowed to make this up to her somehow.

On his honour as a Potter.

United Kingdom, October 31st, 1981…

James could not believe the situation before him.

After over a year living in this safe-house, just as he had begun to let his guard down, the unthinkable had happened: Voldemort had found them.

No, that wasn't quite good enough an explanation for how this came to pass. Voldemort, for all his power, did not have the methods to bypass a Fidelius spell so smoothly. Hell, if it hadn't been for the proximity alert spells he'd placed on the perimeter in a fit of justified paranoia, they would have never realized he'd found them until the door was blasted off its hinges.

The implications of their current circumstances were thus quite dire. Voldemort had gotten their address from the Secret-Keeper himself, which meant either one of two things: Peter had cracked, or Peter had turned.

With all due respect to his currently absent friend, James knew quite well that both possibilities were good ones. Peter had all the willpower of a worm, and had an unhealthy admiration for powerful people. In his youth, the source of said admiration had been Dumbledore, James himself, Sirius, and Remus—thus why he had been part of the Marauders. However, now that they were adults, and given the passive way Dumbledore was fighting the war, James

could make the logical leap to believe that Peter had found his new object of admiration in Voldemort.

Unfortunately, Voldemort was all too willing to confirm this as they duelled.

"Pathetic, Potter!" the Dark Lord scoffed as he deflected another vicious spell from James. Truthfully, the dark mage was quite impressed with the Potter patriarch, noting both the man's liberal use of lethal spells and the power behind them. However, as fighting just as psychological as it was physical, he would not show this admiration before his enemy. "It's no wonder that simplistic rat of a friend of yours turned to me, if this is the best Dumbledore's elite can do!"

Noting to himself that he would later go and punish his traitorous friend for this betrayal, James ignored the taunt and kept up his skilful duel with the Dark Lord, mindful enough to dodge the Unforgivables whenever Voldemort lashed out with them. Years ago, this sort of attitude would not have been his modus operandi at all. He would have taken the taunt to heart, bull-charged the Dark Lord, and would have probably taken an Avada Kedavra to the face for his foolhardiness.

A year of isolation, however, had done wonders for his patience and self-restraint, and he was able to brush off the psychological attacks with almost laughable ease. Being self-restrained, however, did not mean he was good enough to deal with an erratic and enraged Voldemort, which was why he forewent any retorts. His best bet, at this point, was to keep the Dark Lord's attention on himself while Lily secured Harry's room and then returned to help him.

Having spent a little over a year with Lily and Harry as his only constant company meant that James was intimately knowledgeable of his wife's abilities. Where he might have been more cavalier about a duel with Voldemort previously, he was now fully cognizant to the need of having a skilled partner to help him, and he wasn't above asking his darling wife for help (she had browbeaten that out of him months ago).

As it was, however, James knew he had to buy Lily a few more minutes while she made Harry's room into virtually an impregnable fortress, such that Voldemort would not be able to enter the room

with any ease—thereby guaranteeing that he would keep his attention on the Potter elders. If they were gone, then logically there wouldn't be any chance for Harry to survive either.

Thus, with more skill than Voldemort had expected of the Potter patriarch, James gave as hard as he got, his elaborate footwork serving to keep him out of the path of the more dangerous spells—one of which, if he didn't contain it soon, would set the whole house on fire.

Spell after spell flew between the two combatants as they performed their deadly dance. With almost instinctive speed, James deflected one spell, then another, then spun in place to avoid another and deflected the one after that one. Similarly, Voldemort spent his time either firing spells or deflecting them as James Potter slowly made his way up his personal list of "Rivals Who Need To Die."

It was a shame that the raven-haired man would not turn to his camp. With such untapped skill and power, he would have made one of his best lieutenants. Trying to turn him was, however, an exercise in futility, as he knew the man held steadfast loyalty to his family and its time-honoured ideals of justice and loyalty.

Unaware of the thoughts racing in the Dark Lord's head, James kept up his end of the duel, playing for more time as he felt the final touches of the security spells on Harry's room being set. Lily was almost done, and he would need to save his strength for when she joined in the fight, which would likely force Voldemort to kick it up a notch.

True to his predictions, the moment Lily entered the fray—wand ablaze as she raced down the staircase—Voldemort resorted to using his more destructive spells, causing holes to appear all over the house as explosions blasted them into creation.

To the Dark Lord's frustration, he could not seem to get a hit on either Potter elders. Each was displaying an unusual amount of skill for their age, and this confounded the dark mage. That worm of a spy had told him that the two had spent their time in near isolation—so how could they become this good at duelling?

Unfortunately for him, thinking about his enemies' capacities caused him to fail to notice the fact that in between spellfire, the two Potters

had been casting spells at the floor as they circled him. The end result, however, became quickly apparent when James shouted out, "Lily! NOW!"

With a nod, she raised her wand and pointed it at Voldemort—who was unknowingly standing smack dab in the centre of it—at the same time that James did, a spell forming on her and James' lips before the Dark Lord realized what was going on.

"Signus Fulmens!" the two cried out, just as Voldemort raised his wand in a final, desperate attempt to take one of the two down with him.

"Avada Kedavr—" the word died right on the last letter as Voldemort then began to scream, his concentration shattered by the runic spell the two Potters had cast on him, causing millions of volts of electricity to race throughout his entire body. Within seconds, his body began to emit smoke as the electric current running throughout him burned him from the inside out, until all that was left was a smoking carcass on the floor, its skin completely charred.

It was only then that James nodded at Lily and the two began to releas the spell, allowing the carcass to finally rest in peace. Yet, the moment they started doing so, they jumped back in fright as a black burst of smoky energy shot out from the body with a shrill, ethereal scream, racing out of the house through one of the holes caused by the explosive spells. The resulting fright caused them to hastily break off the spell, causing the consequent feedback to destroy their wands. Lily's snapped roughly in two, while James' exploded into pieces, only sparing his hand from similar treatment due to his having thrown it hastily away as he realized what was about to happen.

Looking at the escape made James realize the danger they were still in, as Voldemort's fire spells continued consuming the safe house. James snorted. Safe house indeed. Looking to his wife, he found her on her knees, the sheer mental exhaustion—coupled with the magical exhaustion of the duel—having taken its toll.

"I'll get Harry," he said as he moved towards the staircase. Moments later, he was back, and with Harry in his arms, the infant bundled up in protective covers. "We've got to get out of here, and quickly," he informed his wife.

Lily nodded shakily. "R-Right…Dumbledore has to be—"

James snorted, cutting Lily off and making her look up at him in surprise. "Dumbledore hasn't got to be told squat," he told her plainly. "What do you think he'll do, when we tell him we offed Voldemort? Leave us be?"

Lily's mind seemed to restart from the exhaustion, and she quickly pieced together her husband's logic. "You're right…he'd all but parade us," she concluded, smiling when she saw the proud look on James' face. "We'd be walking targets for the Death Eaters."

James nodded and looked down at the sleeping infant in his arms. "We can't let him push that kind of life onto us and Harry here," he said determinedly. "We owe it to our son to see to it that he has a peaceful life, away from all this bloody conflict."

Lily still had her doubts, though. "They'll eventually piece it together, you know," she warned him. "And we're wandless now, so we can't protect Harry."

James gave her a stern look. "We're wandless right now," he corrected. "There must be a few decent shops somewhere that would sell us replacements."

"What about Ollivander?"

James shook his head. "Ollivander's thick with Dumbledore. Moment we got new ones, Dumbledore would be all over us," he informed her. He paused for a few moments before looking at her seriously. "I say we try to leave Britain for Europe."

Lily's eyes widened in surprise. "But his," she waved at the corpse, "spies are still monitoring the magical exits, and we don't have our passports or travel visas!"

For the first time that evening, James' eyes twinkled with mischief. "Actually…" he drawled, moving over to his work desk and pulling a manila folder from a drawer. "We do," he corrected her as he waved the folder in the air.

Lily looked stunned. "How? No, nevermind how…when?" she asked, surprised she hadn't noticed the folder before when doing cleaning.

"Two weeks ago," he informed her. "Came in at our postal office box. I had the applications sent about three months ago, just to be sure."

"As a just in case measure?" she asked, raising a dubious eyebrow. James didn't bother to hide his reasons and shrugged.

"For the moment we thought it was possible to leave and not have mister 'I hate all living beings' there on our tail."

Lily gave James a critical look for not having informed her of this counter-measure, but eventually relented and smiled softly, proud of her husband for having thought so far into the future to protect his family. "So, where are we going?" she asked, allowing a teasing tone to enter her voice.

James grinned, offering his free hand to her to help her up. "How do you feel about Bonn?"

West Germany, September 1st, 1984…

"Lily, hurry up with Harry or we're going to be late!"

"We're coming, we're coming!"

James waited patiently at the bottom of the stairs of their small, suburban house for his wife and only son to come to the car. With a wave, he smiled and greeted the neighbours, an elderly couple who were living off the husband's profits during his youth. It spoke much of their financial success that they, like he and his family, were living in Bad Godesberg, the "posh" section of Bonn.

Hell, just to get to his job he had to pass several embassies!

Of course, the way he and Lily passed off their wealth was that he had several overseas investments feeding into his account, which let him work, alongside Lily, as a bookstore owner. It was, to his mind, probably the dullest job on the planet, which was exactly why no one would bother looking for him and Lily there. Everyone who knew them would never expect James Potter working in a bookstore. Ever.

So naturally, he had jumped onto the idea.

Today, however, was an important day for their small family. Harry was beginning kindergarten—his first real step towards a normal, peaceful life. It had taken a little persuasion, but James and Lily were now proud to say that their son was enrolled in the Bonn International School, which Lily had been adamant on Harry entering from the moment she had a glimpse at the offered curriculum, nevermind the fact that it was expensive as all hell—an excuse he couldn't really use, considering their wealth.

The moment Lily and Harry came out of the house, James was all smiles, making the elderly neighbours on the other side of the picket fence laugh knowingly, themselves having had three children in their lifetime. With a grin, James scooped up his son and laughed as little Harry squealed at the sudden loss of ground beneath his feet.

"Excited to go to school?" he asked, laughing when he saw Harry nod his head rapidly in response. "Hah! Looks like he's got your genes there, Lily-love!" he claimed, before giving little Harry a toss in the air and catching him, then repeating it several more times as Harry laughed in excitement.

Lily smiled at the two tolerantly, having gotten used to the antics the two would get up to. While typically a serious minded, albeit fun-loving man, James pretty much reverted to a child-like mindset whenever he was with his son. "Didn't you say we'd be late?" she asked gently, reminding James that they were indeed cutting it close.

The Potter patriarch paled quickly and quickly put his son back on the ground at that realization. "Crap!" he muttered, making sure that his son wouldn't hear him. "You put him in the back while I get the car running," he suggested, quickly getting into the car and starting the engine while Lily patiently got Harry into his seat and secured the seatbelt across his small frame.

"Do you remember the rule for the car?" she asked him gently, smiling when he nodded excitedly. The young boy always loved pleasing his parents with his astounding memory.

"Don't take off the belt!" he exclaimed, full of anticipation at the praise he was sure to get.

Lily smiled warmly, petting him on the cheek lovingly. "That's right!" she said with a smile, making him glow with pride. Laughing, she gently kissed him on the forehead before shutting the car door and getting in front with James.

Turning his head back to drive in reverse, James took the opportunity to grin at his young son and wink at him. "Ready for a fun time at school?"

Little Harry pumped his arms in the air wildly. "Yeah!"

West Germany, April 20th, 1985…

"Um…daddy?"

"Yes, son?" asked James patiently as he worked at his desk, trying desperately not to show the anxiety he was feeling as he knew that any day now, Lily would be giving birth to their second child. Even worse was the fact that he knew via his contacts that somehow, word of their presence had filtered to Dumbledore, so he was even more stressed by the necessary preparations for their move to France.

"Mommy told me to get you…" Harry said softly. "She said to say it was time."

James' reaction to his son's news was to flinch violently, causing the pen he was wielding to shoot off wildly across the embossed paper he was using to finalize a new investment order for his account manager. "What?" he squeaked in surprise, turning around quickly to face his son, who looked scared—as though he thought he'd done something wrong.

"D-Did I say something bad?" Harry asked timidly.

James quickly snapped out of his initial shock, realizing the impression he was giving his son. Quickly, he moved forward and wrapped his son in a tight hug. "Of course not, son," he reassured the boy. "You…just surprised me, that's all. Where's mommy?" he asked quickly.

Harry, his confidence revitalized by the assurance from his father, pointed towards the staircase. "In her room. Is mommy okay?"

James nodded as he pulled back and had his hands on his son's shoulders. "Yes, she'll be fine. Now, remember that special bag mommy and I told you about?" he asked. His son was five, he could handle the weight. At the nod, James smiled. "I need you to get it for me and meet us at the door. Daddy's going to get mommy, and then we're going for a ride, okay?"

Nodding with an excited grin, Harry rushed off to do as he was told, as James sighed and then rushed up the staircase himself, eager to get Lily to the hospital as quick as was humanly possible. Thankfully, this second pregnancy had been more tolerable than the first, but that didn't mean that it was comfortable for Lily…or that she wouldn't verbally abuse him for it.

Soon enough, the small family were on their way towards the hospital, where Harry was forced to wait outside the delivery room, and as a result James opted to stay out as well, giving his wife an apologetic look that she immediately smiled at, silently telling him she understood.

Thankfully, it did not take long for this birth to occur—unlike Harry's, where Lily had been forced to stay in labour for twelve hours before she was ready to give birth. Thus, soon enough, the doors to the delivery room opened and a small cry got James' attention, making him look up at the middle-aged nurse who was smiling gently at the bundle in her arms.

"Herr Potter?" she asked, eliciting a nod. "Ihr Sohn. Glückwünsche!" she said, handing the baby in the blue blanket—denoting its gender—to the second-time father. She laughed softly as she watched James stare dumbfounded at the bundle, as though he couldn't believe that he was a father…again.

"Is that him?" asked Harry excitedly at his side, jumping up and down as he tried to get a look at his new baby brother.

Snapping out of his stupor, James grinned proudly and nodded down at Harry, squatting down so he could see his new brother. "Harry, meet your brother William," he said softly as he noticed the newborn drifting off to sleep.

"He's so tiny!" whispered Harry with awe.

James grinned. "So were you."

"No way!"

Milan, Italy, 1990…

"Damnit!"

Lily said nothing as she watched her husband rage in their new home. With good reason, too…once again, they had been forced to move as their location leaked to Dumbledore, making it at least four times in the past two years that they had to suddenly pack up and move. This time, however, they had barely been able to escape, so quick had the Headmaster reacted to the news.

Instead of raging herself, however, she held onto her two children, who were both hugging her tightly as they watched their father rage away at the unfairness of the situation. She couldn't begrudge him the cathartic action, but she dearly wished he had decided to reserve it for a time that their children weren't a witness to it.

"Why…?" she heard a small voice ask close to her chest. Looking down, she saw that it was Harry who had spoken. When he looked up, she could clearly see the barely suppressed anger raging in those beautiful jade eyes. "Why don't they leave us alone?" he demanded, this time clearly. Lily was uncertain how best to answer that question.

James, however, had no such reservations. "Because, son," he answered, his fist bleeding from the fact that he had slammed it against the wall in frustration. "They think they have a right to force us to be their mouthpieces."

"What's a mouthpiece?" little William asked, curiously.

Lily was about to answer when James cut in once again. "It's someone who says what others want him to say, without regard to how he feels about it," James explained bitterly. "They'd be hounding us all the time…always meddling with our lives…always judging, always looking…"

Harry's intelligent eyes glanced between his mother and father, taking in their expressions and committing them to memory. His father had his head bowed for the first time in Harry's memory, a feeling of desperation and frustration practically oozing from him, while Lily seemed to be doing her very best to act strong for him and his brother, though Harry could see the glint of water forming in her eyes.

Something rose within him—something strange and unfamiliar. It wasn't anger—he knew what that felt like. This was…more uncomfortable than that. It made him want to hurt those who were making his father look so beaten and his mother so sad. It made him want to punish them in ways they could not imagine, and then bow before his parents for forgiveness. It demanded vengeance, in such a way that this would never happen again.

"Can't…we make them stop?" he asked slowly, still trying to hold back the unpleasant feeling rising in his gut.

James sighed, shaking his lowered head. "No one has that kind of power," he stated numbly.

And thus, unknowingly, James lit the fire of ambition within his son.

'If no one has that kind of power, then I will. On my honour as a Potter.'

Liverpool, United Kingdom, 1991…

Harry, or Francis White as he was calling himself now, looked around him cautiously as he neared Liverpool College. It had been an incredible risk, but his parents and he had agreed that, under assumed identities and magical cloaking, he should be able to pass off as a regular person. Fortunately, as most of Britain's magical population centred itself in and around London, the risk of being spotted casually was inestimably low. However, he wasn't about to tempt fate and let his guard down—that had led to many a move on the Continent, and fuelled his desire to hurt the people responsible for bringing such anguish on his family.

Harry couldn't help the wince that the thought of his family brought about. As a further means of ensuring that no one would find out about his presence or theirs, Harry had to enter Liverpool College as

a boarding student. While he missed his family something terrible already, he knew this was as much for their own good as for his. Besides, his dad had given him a two-way mirror, so he wouldn't have to worry about falling out of touch.

Still, this was a novel experience, being out in the world by himself. But, as his father had reminded him, he was a scion of House Potter—he had to be strong, both for his family's sake and for the sake of his own dreams. Dreams that, in the already highly intelligent mind of Harry James Potter, were beginning to take more and more shape by the day.

But for now, he had to content himself with the growing feel of anxiety that he was trying desperately to control. Of course, one was not as smart as he was without realizing exactly what the source of this anxiety was—he was nervous about going to school, just like any other child his age. Would he manage to make friends? What if the teachers were boring as hell? What if he failed a course and his parents found out? What if…?

Harry shook his head violently as he realized he was quickly descending a very slippery slope of flawed logic. Rationally, he could understand that none of these worries were valid as long as he failed to attempt the actions linked to them in the first place. Moreover, he guessed he was looking quite dumb, standing there in front of the school gates with his luggage around him, staring aimlessly at the building in front of him.

He stumbled suddenly as someone hit the back of his left shoulder, and had an angry retort on his lips when he realized it was a young boy about his age, a friendly grin on his face. "What was that for?" he grumbled instead, rubbing his shoulder.

The boy shrugged. "You looked out of it," he offered by way of explanation. He then motioned to the luggage. "You new here?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'll be staying at the boarding facilities," he replied, only to see the boy raise an eyebrow at the elaborate vocabulary. "I'm going to be living here," he dumbed it down.

"Ooooh, why didn't you say so?" asked the boy in confusion, making Harry sigh. Then, the grin was back. "Need help? I know where the others are staying, since my brother's friend is there."

Harry smiled gratefully at the boy, his worries dispelling. "That'd be great, thanks!"

The boy grinned and stuck out a hand. "John. John Lyles," he introduced himself.

Harry grinned and shook the boy's hand. "Francis. Francis White."

And in that instant, Harry made his first friend.

Liverpool College, United Kingdom, 1992…

Harry slumped in exhaustion against his desk, thanking whatever deities there be that the class bell had rung at long last. They had just been through their year finals, and the whole event had been mentally strenuous to the 11-year old. Sure, he was smart for his age, but it didn't mean he enjoyed taking tests and writing until he felt sure his hand would cramp up permanently.

Hearing a groan to his left, he smiled wearily as he immediately attributed it to his best friend, John Lyles. After the brown-haired, grey-eyed boy had helped him out on his first day, the two had been inseparable, despite the fact that John was a local and Harry stayed at the boarding dorms.

"Man, that was a tough one, eh Francis?" he heard John ask him. Harry nodded wearily.

"You said it…I mean, who cares about most of this stuff anyway?" he complained. "No one's going to ask us who the first king of England was, unless we study history in university…"

John made a face. "I know, ugh…"

Absently, Harry noted that half the class was leaving the room, probably to either complain to their friends about the test, or, more likely, to get lunch. "Food?" he asked.

John nodded. "Food."

Slowly, the not-so-dynamic duo got out of their seats and trudged along to the cafeteria. Only to be almost immediately intercepted by

what John had smarmily dubbed "White's Fan Squad," otherwise known as Rose Hughes and Felicia Harding. Harry didn't mind, though—the girls were nice enough to both of them, though he did note that they seemed to hang onto his every word. He wondered why.

John watched with what appeared to be amusement, and a little annoyance, as the two girls immediately came to a screeching halt right in front of the object of their adoration.

"How did you do?" asked Rose, the brainier of the duo.

Harry smiled and waved aside their obvious concerns. "Eh…I did fine, like usual," he assured them. "How about you girls?"

John audibly groaned at the obvious faux-pas, as the girls immediately began to regale Harry with their 'harrowing' tales of finishing their first year Math exam. Suffice to say that, while Harry smiled and nodded at all the appropriate junctures, he was doing so more on autopilot than out of actual listening. He felt bad for the girls, really he did, but complaining about what he saw as simple math was not exactly something designed to get his interest.

Thus, without ever having realized what had happened, Harry had skilfully made them talk as they walked, until they reached the cafeteria and there had to hold up a hand to stop the two girls from talking any further, lest he miss his meal.

"How about we get some food and then finish this delightful conversation?" he asked smoothly, getting a knowing smirk from John as the girls nodded eagerly and went off to grab what they wanted.

Behind him, John snickered. "You know, you could have just not asked them about their day," he noted. Harry shrugged.

"What would be the point of that? It'd be rude and cavalier of me," he said simply by way of explanation. John rolled his eyes.

"You and your fancy, big words."

It was Harry's turn to smirk now. "You could just buy that thesaurus, like I suggested."

"Oi!"

Liverpool College, United Kingdom, 1993…

Breathing a little hard, Harry waited with baited breath as the horde passed right by the closed classroom door he was desperately flattened against, thanking the deities that be that he was too short to be seen through the glass a few inches above his head.

The moment the sound of mass footsteps reached his ears, he practically stopped breathing as he waited for them to pass by the door, praying that they wouldn't decide to check each and every single classroom on the way. Or, that if they did, that they would give up upon seeing that the door wouldn't budge.

It was one of these times that Harry really wished that he could use magic in public, but no dice, according to his parents. His mom and dad had been really strict about that before he even got into Liverpool College, and so one of the standing conditions for his attendance at LC was that he keep his magic a secret, unless told otherwise.

Thinking about his magic, and the current situation, Harry couldn't help the almost instinctive wandless magic exercise he and his dad had designed: a simple snap of his fingers, which in turn caused a spark to appear just off his fingers. That was the extent of his power at the moment, but his dad had told him that even that much was amazing, considering that most mages today could not even produce a spark. For his part, Harry theorized that fire was perhaps his closest aligned element, which would explain why he could create that spark, but not one of electricity, or even a drop of water.

"Hmm?"

Harry had to rally every last bit of his self-restraint not to jump and yelp at the sudden noise. Immediately, his mind raced through the criminal procedure his father had drilled into him that the Ministry of Magic enforced on violators of the Statute of Secrecy. Would they know if this person had seen magic? Could they even detect that small of a spark? If so, why hadn't they already interrupted his other lessons? Could he possibly get away with mind wiping the person in question?

"Oh, someone else is here, huh?" Harry's thought process slowed down considerably upon noticing that the person in question—a girl, by the sound of it—sounded really sleepy. He also noticed, for the first time, that they were in the science room.

That was when a thought struck him. Who sleeps in a science classroom?

"Err…hiya!" he greeted nervously, one hand on the door handle in case she was one of his admirers as well.

The girl, whose figure he could not yet see due to the fact that she seemingly chose to sleep as near to the rear-most corner, and the blinds were down, suddenly clapped her hands, and the lights came on, giving him his first good look of her.

She was short—maybe a head shorter than him—and had curly, golden-blonde hair that was cut to her chin; which, combined with her slightly round facial structure, gave her a very cute appearance. What dissuaded him from lumping her into the same category as his admirers, however, were her eyes.

Ice-blue, they were not looking at him with admiration, lust, or any sort of emotion. Instead, she was seemingly examining him, the way a scientist examined a particularly intriguing exhibit at a zoo. She stared at him for a few seconds before she even replied to his greeting with a nod.

"You're White, right?" she asked. "Francis White, the ex-pat?"

Harry blinked. That certainly wasn't the vocabulary of a 12 year old. "…Yeah, I am. How'd you know? Who are you, anyway?"

The girl gave him a superior smirk that, in any other occasion, would have had him fuming from hurt pride. On her face, however, it merely seemed to reinforce her scientist impression. "I'll have you know that we've been in the same class for the past two years," she informed him primly. "I'm always at the very back, in the corner."

Harry racked his mind for memories of this girl, and sure enough, the few he had of her placed her at the back of the class, usually

looking out the window with a bored look. "I remember now…Eisenheim, wasn't it?" he asked.

The girl nodded, a pleased smile on her face. "That's right. Elicia Maria Eisenheim," she introduced herself proudly. "So, why are you here?" she asked bluntly. "Usually, popular kids like you avoid the classroom like the plague."

Harry narrowed his eyes reflexively at the implied slight. "What do you know?" he snapped back, the hand on the door handle coming off and instinctively shifting to his back, where he was aching to do his wandless magic exercise, since the rhythmic snapping served well for meditative focus. "Just because most people like me doesn't mean I hold a grudge towards academics!"

The girl's disbelieving look said it all, eliciting a twitch in his hidden hand. Harry grit his teeth as his self-control was sorely tested. Why was this one girl getting underneath his skin so easily? Any other girls, even the punkish, gang member wannabes seemed to fall for his charm, but this one seemed totally and absolutely impervious to him!

"Is that why you're constantly being chased by your own little harem of brainless fangirls?" she asked archly, further surprising him with her extensive—and quite vulgar—vocabulary; for a 12-year old, anyway. "Out of a love for learning?" the way she had said that question, her intonation insinuating and not-at-all innocent, sent a wave of indignant anger through him.

"I'll have you know," he started slowly, reeling in his patience, "that each of those girls decided to chase me on their own. I have done nothing to incite them into this sort of action, other than being a mere gentleman."

"But you expected the reaction, didn't you?" she asked shrewdly, those damned blue eyes narrowing calculatingly.

Harry stared angrily at the girl for a moment. "What are you talking about?" he demanded indignantly, "Why would I do such a thing?"

For once, it seemed he got the upper hand, as the girl looked genuinely surprised at his insulted behaviour. She quickly covered it up, however, with a huff. "Don't play dumb!" she shot back. "You've

been using your charms to surround yourself with doting, admiring fans!"

Harry stomped right up to the girl and looked down his nose at her, the insulted look still very much on his face. "How dare you?" he hissed. "I would never do that!"

Now the girl looked positively confused. "Are…you telling me that you've been doing that by accident?" she asked, shocked. "That…no way…"

Harry glared at the girl for a moment before turning and moving back to the door, angrily swinging it open. Halting just prior to leaving the room, he glared over his shoulder at her. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I would never do something like what you said."

With that parting shot, he left the room, schooling his features so that only those who knew his best would be able to discern the irritation in his eyes. Unfortunately for him, that amounted to just about everyone on his "fan squad."

Thus, after the next class, Harry quickly found himself surrounded by what Elicia had apparently rightly dubbed his "doting fans."

"What's wrong, Francis?" asked one girl.

"Did something happen?"

"Everything's alright back home, right?"

"Did someone do something to you, Francis?"

Harry couldn't help but be a little shell-shocked by the realization that Elicia Eisenheim had been completely correct about the people surrounding him. Sure, most of them were girls, but there were quite a few boys in the crowd as well, all asking him what was wrong. Even the teacher seemed quite surprised by this seeming rally around him.

It took quite a bit of persuading on his part to get the group to disperse, though he noted that a few vowed to find out what had happened to their "precious Harry" and fix things. For his part, John seemed to take everything in stride, though he privately let him know

that he was always willing to listen to any issues he might have. Harry appreciated the gesture, but assured him he was fine.

Instead of moping at the fact that the Eisenheim girl was right, Harry decided to ponder on the significance of such a revelation. What should he do about this? Even unconsciously, he was breeding a group of followers, and it didn't sit quite right with him. Logically speaking, shouldn't he be letting them know what was going on? Shouldn't he get them to stop following him around?

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Harry physically stumbled as the words shot right through his mental monologue. Looking behind him, he saw, much to his surprise, Elicia Eisenheim, standing in the corridor of his dorm building. And, from the fact that she was still wearing her uniform, Harry got the nagging feeling that she was either stalking him, or living in this same building. Had he really been that blind to her?

Pushing those doubts aside, he gave the girl a cold stare. "What do you want?" he asked bitterly, hands in his pockets. "Come to have another go at me?"

Elicia shrugged. "If you want, sure," she replied easily. "Technically, I live here too, though, so there's no reason we wouldn't meet in the hallways like this eventually."

Harry kept his glare, which made her sigh. "Not going to let what happened this morning go, are you?" she asked despondently. "Look, I'm sorry I basically called you an insensitive wanker, but from my perspective, that was what it was."

Seeing that Harry didn't seem willing to answer her, Elicia sighed, shrugged, and then resumed her walk past him. She barely made it a few steps ahead of him before he called out to her. Thank goodness they were alone in the hall, thus far.

"Why did you think that of me?" he asked suddenly.

Elicia stopped mid-stride and glanced back over her shoulder. "You're very smart, White," she told him. "And you seem to have a thing for leading others. I figured you'd put two and two together and

decided to use your natural leadership skill to acquire followers early on."

Harry pondered on this. "…And if I do?" he asked tentatively.

Elicia sniffed derisively. "Well, I wouldn't be able to give a positive character reference in the future," she said airily. "But insofar as foresight and planning goes, I'd be very impressed."

"How come?" he asked, curious.

Elicia shrugged. "Most people believe in living for the present, from what I gather," she stated simply. "But only those who meticulously prepare for the future have any real chance of succeeding. Gathering followers now…I reckon you want to be some sort of political leader later on, right?"

"Maybe," he answered noncommittally.

Elicia smirked back at him. "Well, I'd say you've got the evasiveness down pat, though I wonder about the necessary ruthlessness," she noted. "Anyway, even if you aim to be reach the top later, I'll just warn you on this: the position of class best is mine."

Harry looked startled. "Is that why you've been so prissy towards me?" he asked dubiously.

The girl scoffed a little at his shock. "Do you know who the Eisenheims are?" she asked. He didn't even need to answer her, as she already knew what he would say. "Of course not. No one has…yet. My father's a scientist, as is my mother. My grandfathers on both sides were also scientists…and, due to their somewhat eccentric beliefs, the scientific community marginalized them all. I intend to restore some semblance of honour to our name, starting with the position of top student."

With that said, the girl gave a lazy wave over her shoulder and walked away, leaving a mildly stunned Harry behind. He could respect the girl's goals, though he couldn't really warm up to her brash personality. Plus, there was that whole thing about his unintentional use of his natural charisma to make people his followers. That wasn't true, was it?

Harry sighed. Yes it was. How could it not be, after having the facts so plainly laid out for him to understand? That being said, however, what was he going to do about it? The honourable thing would be to simply let his "followers" down as gently as possible and restrain himself in the future.

Although…what was it that Elicia had told him? She wondered about his ruthlessness? Was…that necessary for a leader? Thinking back on the few history lessons they had, as well as thinking about the only leader he really knew—his dad—he came up with a startling answer. To varying degrees, it was necessary to put the overall goal over the wellbeing of others. Especially if one intended to succeed in as grandiose a goal as his own. Had he not intended to force the mages to back off of his family? Hadn't his father noted that to do so would require great power? In both cases, he would have to disregard the wishes of quite a few people in order to get what he wanted.

In fact, wasn't that how things worked anyway? If you wanted something that there were limited quantities of, didn't that mean that someone inevitably had to lose? Thus, wouldn't it be wiser to embrace this gift of manipulation rather than let it act haphazardly?

Still, it left a bad taste in Harry's mouth as he came to this conclusion. Morally speaking, it went against his very nature to abuse people that way, and even as he wanted to reach the level of power where he could get the mages to back off, he didn't want to do it at the cost of someone else's happiness and potential. That wasn't the kind of leader he wanted to be.

A thought struck him then.

Couldn't he technically use his natural charisma to encourage others to develop themselves? Moreover, if he gathered people around him and turned them into his followers, wouldn't he be able to both improve their own abilities with subtle encouragement and further his own goals? That would be like having his cake and eating it too!

"There he is!" he heard someone cry far behind him—probably at the end of the hallway.

Harry smiled. Time to see if his alleged talent was as good as the Eisenheim girl said it was.

Dover, United Kingdom, 1993…

The emaciated man woke groggily as he felt his current 'mattress' rock a little. It was at this point that he also felt the need to panic wildly as he failed to recognize his surroundings. Had the events of the previous few days been a total lie? Had he actually been dreaming everything up? Was reality really determined to be just that cruel to him? He shut his eyes tightly as he felt tears of frustration building up.

"Oi, looks like the guest of honour's finally woken up!" the filthy man heard someone speak loudly—too loudly, for his comfort. "About time, princess!" he heard the man then say a lot closer to him.

The man opened his eyes again, this time to see a rather plain, older looking man grinning toothily down at him, wearing a brownish, plaid scally cap, of all things. What bad period film did this man just walk out of?

"Cor, you look all beat to hell!" the man swore, further reinforcing the emaciated man's belief that he had just fallen into a really bad period film. "Good thing we got to you when we did, eh?"

The emaciated man tried to speak, but found his throat incredibly parched. A particularly nasty side-effect of living in hell on earth for the past thirteen years. Still, he persisted, until a few words managed to get out. "…W-Where…w-who…?" he managed to rasp out.

His apparent saviour seemed to realize the difficulty he was having with speaking, so he quickly turned around to talk to someone else, apparently. "Hey, Brit-love, got any juice for our man back here?" he called out.

"Only water, Dan!" the emaciated man heard a woman call back. "Bosses' orders! Nothing more than water till he sees a doc!"

The man called Dan seemed to scoff in mock irritation at the answer, giving the emaciated man a commiserating look. "Sorry, friend, but none of the good stuff, it seems. Be back in a jiff," he said, before seemingly walking away from him.

The man lay back, staring up at the ceiling, only to note that it was strangely metallic—nothing like the prison cell he'd been used to for the past thirteen years. Moreover, who was that Dan fellow? He'd never seen anyone like him in prison, that's for sure—and he'd been in that blasted place to essentially put a name to every prison guard in the blasted compound. It served as a way to get the tormenting voices in his head to stop compounding his horrifying guilt.

He was unable to ponder the identity of his apparent saviour or where he was for much longer, however, as Dan came back, a metallic canteen in hand. Carefully, he lifted the man into a sitting position against his pillow and placed the canteen on his lips, which the emaciated man opened thankfully as the cool water began to run into his mouth.

After a few gulps, the man already felt much better, now that his throat had stopped inflicting as much pain as before. Dan seemed to grasp his relief, as he grinned toothily once more.

"Much better, eh?" he asked jocularly. "Must've been hell, where you been. I'm former Army myself, and I've never seen a guy look as bad as you!"

"W-Who…" the man rasped out, still hurting a bit with every attempt he made to speak. "W-Who are you people…?"

Dan looked like he wanted to slap himself. "How could I forget?" he mumbled before pointing to himself with his thumb. "Name's Daniel. Daniel Livingstone, formerly a Sergeant in the Queen's Army; retired now," he introduced himself before jutting his thumb over his shoulder. "Up ahead is the missus, Britney Livingstone. We're…how did the bosses put it? We're the rescue party."

The man blinked. Hadn't he been set free a few days ago legally? Why would he need to be rescued. "W-Why?" he managed to ask, before his throat demanded his silence.

Dan blinked. "Why what?" he asked, confused. "Why did we save you?" at the man's nod, he laughed. "According to the bosses, you've been in some hell-hole for the past thirteen years, right? Well, they're the ones who sent all the evidence that was needed to get you set free."

The man blinked. Who would do such a thing for him? He was most certain that his name was mud in pretty much all social circles, after all. Furthermore, if they had the evidence to exonerate him, why hadn't they done so earlier? Voicing this concern merely served to get a scowl from the usually jovial man.

"Aye, well, I've heard that the bosses have been stopping non-stop since they heard about your situation a decade ago," Dan informed his care. "From what I gather, no one believed them for just as long, so they had to gather as much irrefutable evidence as they could before finally convincing the authorities to let you go. Not very clear on the details themselves, but judging from what I heard, those bigwigs were determined to keep you locked up, even in the face of all the evidence."

Well, the lack of details would certainly explain how a Muggle, of all people, managed to get his hands on the most despised criminal in recent Mage history, barring Voldemort himself.

He stared as he watched Dan chuckle then. "Sorry, sorry," apologized the old veteran with a wave. "It's just, I can barely wrap my head around the fact that I, a former army man, a law abiding citizen, would be helping Sirius Black, of all people, get smuggled out of the country."

"Y-You know w-who I am?" Sirius asked in a rasp.

Dan nodded. "It'd be a damn silly thing for me to get involved in this if I didn't, now wouldn't it?" he asked sardonically. "The missus' sister is a mage, or so she tells me. Personally, I can see it—never did like the harpy much, and there's always strange things going on around me when she's around."

Sirius could only stare at the whimsical explanation of his associated mage status. Still, his curiosity was barely satiated. "W-Where are we?" he asked weakly.

Dan grinned. "Location-wise? Dover, about to board the ferry for France. Specifically? In the back of a cargo truck," he said, before chuckling. "Gotta say, it was a damn pain calling in those favours to make sure they didn't check the container. Still, props to the bosses for getting the authorities to back off."

Sirius' curiosity was once again piqued by the identity of his mysterious benefactors. Who were these people who were going through so much trouble on his behalf? Moreover, why was it necessary to begin with? Dumbledore had promised to set him up at his old home, and Remus had even come forward to apologize for doubting his moral integrity—not that the old wolf needed to, as Sirius himself had doubted Remus to begin with, so he could understand; though, that didn't make him any less saddened by the apparent gap that had grown between him and his best friend.

He felt the whole room—now revealed to be merely a cargo container—shake. He had to admit, this was a novel experience. "So…who did you say you worked for?" he asked, feeling his throat lighten up on the continuous pain.

Dan grinned. "Sorry, not allowed to say."

Sirius groaned. This was going to be a long trip.

Liverpool College, United Kingdom, March 1995…

"Hey, White?"

"Yes, John?" asked Harry patiently as he worked studiously on his History homework.

"Didn't you say you and Kat were over?" asked his best friend.

Harry sighed. "Let me guess, she's two tables over, one to the right?" he asked knowingly. "Perhaps sitting with Allison, Felicia, and Joan?"

John whistled appreciatively. "That's trippy, that is," he praised. "But yeah, she's there. Looks surprisingly…predatory for a girl who just broke up."

Harry sighed. "Tell me about it," he moaned, his writing stopping as he leaned his face into an open palm in frustration. "They all seem to misunderstand the concept of breaking up."

John laughed. "Only you would complain at the fact that your exes still want to jump your bones, even after you've dumped them!"

"Look, there was no chemistry there!" Harry defended himself. "It practically felt like having servants at my beck and call, not a girlfriend!"

John snorted. "Yes, because what bloke in his right mind wouldn't want to be waited on by pretty girls?" he asked sardonically. Harry glared at his friend without any real venom.

"I'd rather have a girl who's my intellectual equal, thank you very much," he said, perhaps a tad too loud. Almost immediately, squeals seemed to emanate from quite a few tables, and Harry had to groan as he let his head fall onto the table.

John held no pity for his best friend, however. "Well done, old chap!" he said gleefully as he watched girl after girl seemingly bull-rush the library stacks. "Looks like the teachers are going to love you for inspiring every girl aged thirteen to fifteen to become a bookworm."

Harry groaned. "Oh, come on!" he complained as he powerlessly watched every girl his age or younger in the room suddenly decide they wanted to become nuclear physicists on his behalf. "When am I ever going to learn to stop saying these things out loud?"

John cackled at the delicious situation his friend had buried himself in. It only grew further when he saw a familiar face stomp right up to their table, a scowl aimed right at Harry.

"WHITE!" Elicia Eisenheim all but yelled indignantly, shutting up the librarian with a death glare that made the poor old man look away in fear. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"I didn't mean to!" he protested weakly, his hands raised in a placating fashion. "It…just slipped!"

The furious girl wasn't easily tamed, however, and slammed her open palms on the table. "As if it's not hard enough to compete with you for the top spot in academics, you now have to turn almost three generations of students into potential applicants for Mensa?" she ranted.

"Ellie…" Harry tried soothingly. Despite their often highly pronounced rivalry, he and Elicia were, deep down, more akin to close friends than actual rivals.

Elicia didn't want to hear it, however. "Don't Ellie me, White!" she hissed at him, fully cognizant that Harry's fans were beginning to notice the dressing down she was giving him. "Fix it!"

"Hey, leave White alone!" they heard a girl call out nearby.

"What's the matter, Eisenheim, worried we'll take your place?"

"Could it be that she actually thinks she can top White? As if!"

While these comments were flying, Harry and John were, for their part, sweating profusely as they caught a front-row seat to Elicia's reaction…and it wasn't pretty. Her open palms on the table, for one, had curled into tight fists, growing whiter by the second due to the lack of blood circulation there. Her fluffy hair had also fallen to cover her expression, which meant only one thing—she was pissed. Harry audibly whimpered.

"E-Ellie…?" Harry tried tentatively.

John, for his part, scooted away from his best friend, deliberately leaving him to the wolves…or greatly ticked off she-wolf, in this case.

"…On second thought, White, don't fix it," Elicia eventually said, her head rising a bit so that she could meet his eyes. He gulped at the fierce glare she was giving him. "It'll be that much more worth it when I crush you."

Meekly, Harry could do naught but nod, seeing as that was probably the best way to get out of this situation without getting a kick in the nads.

Liverpool College, United Kingdom, September 1995…

"You actually called for them?" asked John, quite surprised. "What happened? Did you suddenly decide you were a masochist?"

Harry glared at his best friend, motioning towards the young boy at his side. "Please don't make such insinuations within earshot of my brother, John," he half-asked/half-demanded from his best friend.

Young William blinked a few times in confusion. "What's a mas…masa…masochist?" the boy tried the unfamiliar word out a few times.

"Someone who enjoys being hurt," Harry said automatically.

"Your brother," John then decided to add, completely deadpan. Harry thwacked him on the back of the head.

"Stop telling him lies!"

William ignored the byplay and looked up at his brother. "You enjoy being hurt, big brother?"

Harry sighed. "No, I don't, Will," he assured his younger sibling. "John…has a weird sense of humour. You'll understand one day. Then maybe you can explain it to me," he added sardonically as he eyed his best friend, who was making a big show of 'how hard White had hit him,' even though they both knew Harry had been holding back. A lot.

William giggled. "Your friend is weird!"

Harry sighed, palming his face. "Don't I know it," he muttered, before catching sight of what was arguably his other best friend in the whole campus, even though she would deny it to her grave.

Thankfully, he didn't have to call out to her, as she had caught sight of him and John, and had been curious about the younger boy between them.

"Hey John, White," the two older boys ignored the venom with which she pronounced Harry's name. It was more of a game at this point than actual enmity. "Who's the runt?"

William glared up at the girl. "I'm not a runt!" he protested.

Elicia raised an eyebrow at the little boy's defiance. "Well, he's got spirit," she noted before turning her attention back to the older boys. "So, really, who is he?"

John answered for Harry. "He's White's kid brother," he said plainly.

Elicia stared at Harry for what seemed was an eternity. "There are more of you?" she asked incredulously.

Harry mock glared at her. "Is that so wrong?" he asked petulantly.

"You really want an answer to that?"

William looked between the two for a moment, absorbing the way his brother and this girl were interacting, before coming to a conclusion he felt he needed to validate. "Are you two together?"

It was amazing to John Lyles how one innocent question had such a resounding effect on his two closest friends…and the horde of Harry's pursuing admirers that had just rounded the corner. His best friend was staring at his younger brother with wide eyes, his mouth opening and closing intermittently, but with no sound coming out of it. Elicia, for her part, was thunderstruck and seemingly frozen in place, a look of horror permanently painted on her face. The horde of admirers, for their part, seemed just as frozen at the younger boy's question.

Thus given this amply amusing situation, John burst out in hysterical laughter, even doubling over as he felt the wind from his lungs start to run out from the constant, exhaling laughter.

William cocked his head to the side a bit, confused by everyone's reactions. "What?"

This just served to send John into another burst of frenzied laughter, actually dropping him to the ground as he held his stomach, alternating between laughing and whimpering from the pain.

Harry was the first one to snap out of his stupor and looked down at his brother carefully. "Will, why would you think such a thing?" he asked carefully. "Elicia and I are most definitely not together."

He ignored the collective sigh of relief from the horde. Elicia herself, however, seemed about ready to kill his younger brother for the mistaken assumption.

William was thankfully innocently unaware of his impending doom. "Well, dad told Izzy and I stories about when he and mom were in

school, and it kinda sounded like how you two were acting," he laid out his child-like logic.

Harry palmed his face at the obvious link between he and Elicia and his parents. Of course William would make such a childish link…it was pretty much the essence of ape-like imitation, which was how children learned most things.

Though she had come to the same conclusion, Elicia was far more proactive about her discontent. Squatting down to his eye level, she fixed William with a glare. "Look here, brat: I am not your boneheaded brother's girlfriend," she hissed at him. "He is my rival, got it? Rival."

William once again cocked his head to the side. "Dad said that was what mom used to call dad in school," he said innocently.

John couldn't help the subsequent burst of laughter, though from the look of his face, he was in danger of passing out from lack of oxygen to the brain. Elicia glared at him angrily and kicked him lightly on the shin for the display.

"Oh, shut up!" she hissed at him, her face tomato-red with a hefty blush as she walked away from the trio. Still, before she was out of speaking range, she looked over her shoulder at Harry and glared viciously at him. "We'll have words later, White."

With that, she stomped away, leaving behind a slightly trembling Harry—who feared Elicia's future reprisals—and a twitching John, who was torn between whimpering from the pain of Elicia's kick or keep on laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Predictably, he laughed.

Liverpool, United Kingdom, February 1996…

"Speak of this to anyone, and I will neuter you, White,"

Harry gulped as he tentatively held the hand of Elicia Eisenheim, the both of them out for a nice walk through the city that had become their home for the past six years. The worst part of the threat was the fact that he knew, for a fact, that she would.

"That ashamed of me, are you?" he asked humorously.

Elicia's head spun so fast he momentarily wondered whether or not she got whiplash from the act. "You know that's not it," she said seriously.

Harry gave her an understanding look. "I know, I know…I'm just teasing you," he assured her, before chuckling at a not-that-distant memory. "Still, hard to believe that Will was actually spot on a year ago."

Elicia harrumphed. "The brat's perceptive, I'll give him that," she conceded. "Even if he did get the timeframe wrong," she gave him a sidelong glance. "Still can't believe it took you nearly three months after he made his little observation to ask me out…and in such a lame way, too!"

"You looked like you wanted to kill me for the longest time after that!" he defended himself. "Besides, what's wrong with how I asked you out?"

Elicia glared at him. "Oh, I don't know…maybe it was the part where you actually said, 'Hey, Elicia, err…I was thinking….maybe we should give what William said a try?'" she mock-imitated him. "What girl wants to hear that?"

Harry sighed. "Okay, so it wasn't Shakespeare, but give a guy a break, Ellie!"

Elicia looked away. "I am," she told him, before looking back at him with a wide, content smile. "We've known each other for what…five years now? I know you better than to take that sort of thing to heart."

Harry smiled at her and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek, which, much to both their surprise, she allowed to happen, causing her to blush cutely when his lips made contact with her cheek.

The two walked in silence for a while, taking in the sights and occasionally stopping for a treat. Soon enough, they found themselves on a park bench outside Liverpool Cathedral. Harry had his arm around Elicia's shoulders, with the other leaning on the bench's back. Elicia, for her part, seemed to be nursing a plastic cup of hot coco.

"You realize this is going to get out eventually, right?" Harry finally asked as he leaned his head back and looked up at the cloudless sky. "You and me, that is."

Elicia nodded her head. "I know," she admitted. "Kinda hard to keep this sort of thing secret," she added with a weak smile.

"John's going to kill me for keeping this from him," Harry groaned. "William will probably be intolerable."

Elicia laughed, making his stomach twist a little. He loved her laugh—it wasn't loud and braying like John's, but rather soft and melodic. "You're worried about your best friend killing you? I'm worried about your adoring fans killing me," she reminded him.

The two laughed lightly at the thought of their respective threats harming them, before slowly descending into silence.

Harry broke the silence again. "I've decided," he said suddenly, making Elicia freeze up under his arm. "I'm going to join the Army when I'm done with my Bachelor's," he informed her.

Elicia sighed and leaned into him, enjoying the warmth of his presence over the cold weather. "I still don't approve, you know," she reminded him. "You've got so much potential, White…why waste it on the Army?"

Harry was stubborn, however. "You know what I want, Ellie…the Army's the best way for me to get it," he told her.

"Plenty of politicians have managed getting into Number Ten without the need to become trained killers," she reminded him before sighing again. "But I'm guessing there's more to it than just getting Army credentials, huh?"

Harry nodded, bringing his arm to pull her closer to him. "Perceptive as always," he praised her. "I need the Army's backing for what I want, Ellie. Political power isn't enough here…I need raw, violent power to back me up."

Normally, that sort of comment would have insinuated his desire to become a dictator, but Elicia knew him better after all these years.

So, instead, she made the link to the one thing she could never truly grasp about her boyfriend's life. "It's got to do with why your parents are still living on the Continent, doesn't it?" she asked perceptively.

Harry smiled proudly. "Yes," he answered simply.

Elicia smiled sadly as she curled into his chest. "Well, I can't fault you for putting family first," she said sadly. "I wish I could, but I can't…since I'm doing the same."

Harry looked down at the girl in his arms with a raised eyebrow. "Aren't you going to ask me why they're on the Continent?" he asked curiously.

"Would you tell me?" she asked right back.

Harry was silent for a moment. "…I see your point," he conceded, eliciting a giggle from Elicia. They remained in their current position for quite a bit thereafter, simply enjoying each other's presence without the need for further conversation.

It wasn't until Harry absently noted that it was getting a little darker that he realized they needed to get back to the dormitory soon. "It's getting late," he told her, nudging her a bit to get her attention.

Elicia sighed. "Too bad…it's not like we can do this often," she lamented. "Not without blowing our cover, anyway."

"Would it be so bad?" he asked suddenly, before his mind was able to filter out the question. "I mean, sure, the backlash would be painful for a while…but it'd be worth it, right?"

Elicia smiled indulgently at her boyfriend and then, very deliberately, poked him on the forehead with her index finger. "Of course not, you berk!" she chastised him. "You need them for whatever scheme that wonderfully brilliant mind of yours has cooked up, and I like having some peace and quiet in my life."

Harry laughed weakly at how direct his girlfriend was. "…As always, you're absolutely right, Ellie. Makes one wonder who's the genius of us two."

Elicia smiled up at him and kissed him on the nose. "That's easy," she said pulling back. "We both are."

Harry laughed.

Derby Hall, United Kingdom, 1997…

The knocking sound on the door was the first thing to wake Harry up in the morning. The second thing to fully get him cognizant was the fact that he was not, in fact, in his own dorm room. The third thing that served to make his brain practically fry itself from an overload was the fact that there was a girl in bed with him.

Immediately, all three quite valid points connected with each other, leading Harry to make a very logical, and at the same time, very scary realization.

He was in a…he looked around…girl's room, in her bed, with her beside him, as someone—probably the tutor in charge of the Hall—was coming for a visit.

Well fuck.

Which, ironically, was also a fantastic description of what he'd done overnight.

Of course, to aggravate matters, he felt his companion in bed stir within the sheets as the knocking intensified.

"Mmm…White…"

And that was when Harry's mind really kicked into gear and the memory of last night came back in full. Looking down, it was only confirmed. Curly, golden hair? Check. Heart-shaped face? Check. Girlfriend of a year? Check. He felt two something's press into his side. B-cup breasts? Definitely check.

Which all amounted to a single conclusion: he was a dead man. Or, more accurately, once the person on the other side of the door—whoever it was—came in, he was a dead man. Between Elicia's embarrassed rage, the school's hardliner policy against sex in the dorms, and his own parents' likely negative reaction to the event, he

was pretty certain he'd need a closed casket funeral when they were done with him.

Maybe god loved him, though, as the knocking did eventually stop, and he heard a mature voice—holy crap that was a tutor!—mutter, "She's probably still asleep," before walking away.

Letting out a shuddering breath as he felt his heart start up again, he was quickly beset by another problem—his blood flow was not working to his advantage. Instead, it seemed to be going in the exact opposite direction he wanted it to go. The fact that his girlfriend was lying naked next to him—covered only in a sheet—did not make things easier on him.

Still, there was no way of getting out of his current predicament, considering the vice grip Elicia had on him. Somehow, during their post-coital sleep, she seemed to have decided that he was a better pillow than the actual one Harry was sleeping on. So, instead of uselessly trying to crawl out of the grip—which would have only woken Elicia up and brought him into a world of pain for having done so—he decided to review the events that had led to his current situation.

First, he remembered that John had told him and Elicia, right after one of their 'spats,' that there would be a party at a nearby club. As none of them were technically of age to order alcoholic drinks, John had suggested they go simply to hang out.

In hindsight, Harry really should've known better.

Next thing he knew, he was drinking some of the foulest pop ever, and before he could even confront John about it, Elicia had giggled drunkenly, grabbed his face and smashed her lips onto his, to the shock of damn near everyone who knew them. After that, everything went downhill.

John, being John, was only really shocked, after which he laughed uproariously and patted Harry on the back, giving him his sympathies for landing such a firecracker as a girlfriend. Others, mostly Harry's unofficial fan club, mostly lamented loudly how someone else had beaten them to the punch, having remarkably matured in their outlook over the years…especially considering the

amount of girlfriends he'd gone through before mysteriously deciding to go celibate a year ago. Well, this certainly explained things.

The rest of the night was a complete blur to Harry, as he vaguely remembered drinking a bit more of the foul tasting liquid, practically grinding against Elicia on the dance floor, and then stumbling drunkenly out of the pub towards the dorm…where all he could remember was a searing kiss at her dorm room, a whirlwind of clothing, and then nothing except the sensation of absolute pleasure.

Harry palmed his face, thanking whatever deity there be that his younger brother hadn't seen him get drunk, or outside Elicia's door. Either would have landed him in hot water with the parents.

Hell, no matter how he cut this, it was a bad idea all around. Sure, he loved Elicia—even if he couldn't tell her that to her face. The problem wasn't lack of affection…in a twisted, funny way it was the complete opposite. He loved Elicia so much that the very thought that he would have to break up with her was killing him, more so now that they had consummated their relationship on a carnal level.

The worst part was that he knew his brilliant girlfriend would reach the same conclusion…which would only lead to moments of horrible awkwardness between the two. Everything would have been so much simpler had last night not happened.

"…Huh…" he heard a soft, feminine voice exclaim at his side, letting him know that Elicia had just woken up. "…not how I imagined my first time being."

Harry was surprised she was, so far, taking this as well as she seemed to be.

"Remind me to kill Lyles when I see him next," she then added, and Harry's original idea of her reaction returned full force. "Slipping alcohol in our drinks…I swear I'll beat some sense into him!"

While Harry might have been worried before, he was now bordering on afraid, as Elicia had just ranted about killing his best friend in a completely calm and collected manner. There had not been a single raised intonation in her voice, which sort of scared him.

"…Ellie?" he tried tentatively.

"…I'm not mad at you," she assured him after a moment. "We were both drunk. And, let's face it, if the alcohol was any indication…we both wanted this."

"…This is surprisingly tolerant of you…" he noted warily, as if waiting for the moment when she would beat him up for having taken her virginity.

She looked up from her place on his chest and gave a weak smile. "Don't be fooled," she told him. "I'm freaking out, Francis…I really am."

Harry sighed and wrapped his arms around her, desperately trying to ignore her very obvious nakedness. "I know, Ellie…so am I," he admitted, the full impact of her confession very apparent to him, especially considering she used his first name, as opposed to his last name as usual.

"This…complicates things…" she whimpered into his chest.

Harry sighed; she'd come to the same conclusion he had…the one he detested above all things. "It does," he agreed.

"I'm going to kill Lyles," she said vehemently, eliciting a throaty chuckle from Harry as he tried to push back the tears that threatened to form.

"Y…You know why he even took us to that party?" he asked.

"…No," she admitted softly.

"Papers came in this morning…I got into Welbeck," he informed her, his voice nearly breaking by the end of his admission. It was all he could do to put one arm over his eyes as he smiled tragically.

"Oh…" she replied, sounding just as heartbroken as he was trying not to sound.

Harry felt his chest get wet, and knew his girlfriend had broken just as he had. "It must be raining outside," he mumbled.

"It's not…" she mumbled right back.

Harry shook his head vehemently. "No…it's raining," he said with determination, his teeth visibly clenched.

Elicia looked up from her place at his face, only to see mildly glistening streaks at the side of his eyes, which were otherwise covered by his arm. Smiling at his thinly veiled attempt at retaining some form of macho attitude, she lay her head back on his chest and nodded, letting her own frustrated tears fall on his chest uninterrupted.

"Yeah…it's raining."

Welbeck College, United Kingdom, 1997…

"Welcome to Welbeck, recruits!" greeted the man in the standard red dress uniform of the British Armed Forces. "You are all here because you have been selected by the various boards you chose to approach to become the very best officers of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, or Her Distinguished Civil Service!"

Harry barely had one ear on the instructor's speech, his mind too focused on Elicia, whom he had barely just left at the gate of Welbeck College. It had been their final goodbye. The day before the new term was to start, they had gone to her hotel room and made love for what seemed an interminable amount of time, always whispering "I love you" to each other with every thrust or moan.

"Here at Welbeck, we emphasize the very best qualities that all future members of Her Majesty's distinguished services must uphold!" the instructor kept going. "Leadership! Skill! Responsibility! Honour! What you learn here, cadets, will get you through your life no matter what path you take! More importantly, it will keep you alive!"

Harry's mind could not be taken off Elicia, however—something he knew he would have to work on at some point. Still, it was damned hard to get the beautiful, brilliant, and feisty blonde out of his head. Logically speaking, she was everything he wanted in a woman. She wasn't a yes-woman and unwilling to point out his flaws…rather, she sometimes took an inordinate amount of pleasure in doing so! She loved to tease him, and loved being teased right back. She was his

intellectual equal, and could predict much of his own train of thought before he had even gotten there.

But in the end, it wasn't to be…and the reason was their dreams. The dreams and hopes that Harry and she had were unfortunately not on the same path…or even near to each other. Harry was determined to walk down a lonely path to power, willing to wallow in the mud and filth of politics and war, while she wasn't. She wanted to keep learning, to discover and create. Their personalities might have matched, but their dreams were completely incompatible. Eventually, one of them would have had to compromise, and neither was willing to do so. Both of them had too much riding on their dreams to just give up, and they both knew it.

So they did the logical thing and ended their relationship.

It hurt like hell, and even now, Harry had to keep his poker face in check, lest he burst into tears at how much it was hurting to know he would never be with his precious Ellie, but he knew it was for the greater good. This way, both of them would be able to go for their dreams without being held back by emotional attachments. It was the logical thing to do.

So why did it hurt so much?

"Welcome to Welbeck," the instructor said again, this time with a predatory grin. "You think you've seen hell? You've seen nothing yet."

Cumbria, United Kingdom, 1998…

Harry wheezed as he and his section ground to a halt after a day of trekking. When he'd first applied to Welbeck, he'd been told that the Cumbria exercise would, at most, be a two-week camp during the summer. He had never expected things to have turned out the way they currently were.

But then, no one had predicted the instability on the Continent to accelerate as much as it had. In Spain, there were whispers of Ultranationalists gaining a lot of ground among the common folk, even though the higher ups everywhere else dismissed them as mere relics of Franco's era. The tension between France and Germany was also heating up, as both countries fought a diplomatic

war over how best to approach the increasing crisis in the Balkans, which were well on their way to outright war. It didn't help that Germany, still only newly reunited in 1991, was suffering under the weight of rebuilding East Germany to West German standards. With the French refusing to support the German reconstruction efforts, the process had been slow and painful, especially as the Soviet Union, the bogeyman that the Yanks had been using to keep everyone in line, had vanished.

As a result, Britain had militarized to levels yet unprecedented. Security was much more important now than individual freedom, which was something that shocked many would-be philosophers who had wanted to live in the land of Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith. Propaganda posters had begun to line up practically every street in the UK, boasting the virtues of military service, and quite a few youths fell for the message, increasing the intake at the recruitment centres by nearly 200%.

Thus, as a result, Welbeck College had followed its governmental overlords' commands and further militarized the curriculum, such that Harry was now stuck in a field simulation of small-squad assaults on elevated positions. Something that, in a better world, he would have probably only been asked to do at Sandhurst.

Still, he wasn't about to complain. The mind-numbing increase in exercise and academics had served well to get him out of his depression over breaking up with Elicia, with whom he stayed in ready contact. She would daily send him letters, all handwritten, to tell him how his little brother was doing. Apparently, having been his last girlfriend, she had somehow been unofficially nominated the "mother hen" of his unofficial fan club, so they took to heart her commands to watch over William. Not that he needed it, she told him; William was exceedingly bright, though thankfully devoid of any malevolent guile. Lyles, for his part, was all too eager to play the part of proxy big brother towards William, which filled him with equal parts amusement and worry.

"Penny for your thoughts, sir?" piped up one of the 'soldiers' under his command.

Harry smiled lopsidedly. "Hmm? Oh, it's nothing, Lee," he assured his classmate.

"Wouldn't be a lass, would it?" asked Lee with a perverted smile. "Fine lad like yourself, sir, I'm sure you've been quite popular."

Harry laughed, even as one of the female members of the section decided to thwack Lee on the arm as punishment for his perverted comments. "Close," he admitted, much to the surprise of his section, who had only ever really seen Harry in his morose state. "My ex, to be more precise."

Lee looked confused to all hell. "She dump you, sir?" he asked tactlessly.

"Subtle as a sledgehammer, Lee," Malcolm O'Brian, another section-mate, commented with a sigh.

Harry laughed and waved away O'Brian's concern. "It's fine, it's fine," he assured them. "But no, Lee, she didn't dump me. We agreed to part ways because…well…honestly, that's none of your business," he said with a smile. He pretended to ignore the twin sighs of relief that came from two of the three female members of his section.

"Well then, if we're quite done asking about the CO's love life," the third female member of the group, Alicia Donahue, snarked, "Then could we please get back to the plan?"

Harry nodded, and motioned to Lee. "Lee, map," he ordered.

Complying immediately with the order, Lee had the map of the area flat on the ground in seconds. Harry pointed out a place on the mountain they were on. "This is where we are…roughly speaking," he stated, before pointing at a higher location on the map. "This is the enemy target. So far, our intel suggests the only way to the target is through a direct approach…but as our more vulgar classmates might put it, that option is 'fucking retarded,'" his interpretation of the route drew a few muffled chuckles from his section. "Now, exercise records indicate that the time record for this exercise is set at thirty hours, which, given how long it's taken us to get to this point, and what's left to march up, it physically impossible, unless there's an easier route than climbing the mountain face."

Harry looked at Donahue. "Did you manage to grab one of the pamphlets like I asked?"

The girl nodded and took out said pamphlet out of her kit, then handed it over to Harry, who spread it out over the official map of the region. He smiled almost instantly. "I thought so," he declared, pointing out a red line that seemed to circumvent the cliff face, but would be much easier in climbing. "It's not something most people know, unless they live in the area."

O'Brian looked at the legend underneath the map and read the meaning of the line's colour. "Sir, it also says that the path is not recommended for beginner hikers," he pointed out.

Harry grinned. "Good thing we got all that trekking exercise back at the College then, huh?" he said, brushing away the man's concerns. "If we're careful—and that's been bred into us from day one at the College—then we shouldn't have any trouble getting around the target's defences. Might even make us a new record!"

Donahue looked at her watch. "We'd need to move out right now to do that, sir," she reminded him.

Harry looked at his section, noting their fatigue, and realizing that he was tired as well. "Well? What'd ya say, lads?" he asked. "Show the brass that we're the best, or camp it out and try tomorrow?"

Lee grinned, seemingly taking the role of spokesperson for the group, since they all seemed exasperatedly resigned to what they were about to do…all of them with smiles, however.

"Do you even need to ask, sir?"

Harry grinned and nodded, tossing the now-folded pamphlet back to Donahue and noting that Lee had appropriated the map once again. "Great! Section, move out!" he ordered.

"Sir, yes, sir!"

London, United Kingdom, 1999…

"…HE'S DONE IT!" the announcer said excitedly. "HE'S ACTUALLY DONE IT! THE ROOKIE CHALLENGER HAS TAKEN DOWN THE THREE-YEAR CHAMPION!"

Harry was breathing heavily as he held his fencing sword's tip right off his opponent's mask, his forehead completely covered in sweat at the amazing duel he had just won…even if by the edge of his teeth. It had been an exhilarating duel, to be sure, but Harry had practically given up after a few minutes into it, as it was completely obvious that he was outclassed.

What he hadn't expected, however, was that his opponent had sensed this too, and as a result decided to take it easier in a fit of arrogance—arrogance that cost him his title, Harry noted.

Still, Harry himself could not keep the grin off his own face as he absorbed the fact that he took down a professional fencer. He had been training hard since entering Welbeck College, and although his teachers had sworn up and down the gym that he was a damned prodigy, Harry was less certain about his skills. Now, it was a little hard to disprove them, and he felt mounting pride in his victory.

In such a state, it was only natural for him to raise his sword in victory, and he closed his eyes as he felt the crowd go wild at the gesture. Slowly, he took off the protective mask and held it under his arm, allowing the crowd to get a first-hand glimpse at how much this duel had taken out of him. Needless to say, the floppy, sweat-drenched look, sword raised and helmet under his armpit, made him out to look like a triumphant conqueror. He felt like one too, thanks to the wild cheering in the stands—which, admittedly, were populated mostly by his fellow graduates from Welbeck and his friends from Liverpool College.

Either way, it was a damn good way of seeing how many people had his back…and he was proud to say it was quite a bit. It wasn't just students among his supporters, but instructors from both Liverpool and Welbeck as well. Just as much among the staff as among the pupils, Harry was considered a rising star—a prodigy in warfare and leadership. He never flaunted it, no matter how much his few enemies said he did, and when he did show his skills, they almost always resulted in his victory. He could still lose, but as time went on and his skills grew, it became harder and harder to force that loss onto him.

Hell, he had even managed to convince the Sandhurst admissions board to let him first get an undergraduate degree at Oxford before enlisting as an official officer cadet. Considering the amount of

praise his instructors at both Welbeck and Liverpool were willing to shower on him, they had been hard pressed to say no, especially since every recommendation they got for him made it clear they were willing to bet their jobs on his worth in the Armed Forces. That was quite an endorsement for anyone to have, especially with the state in constant military alert.

It was once he was outside, however, that he felt even more eagerness. He had told Elicia about his entry into the finals, and she'd promised to come watch. It was, in hindsight, probably the dumbest move he'd ever made, considering the fact that he needed to get over her, but at the same time, he knew it wouldn't be right to exclude her from such an important even in his development.

Thus, he couldn't help but feel crushing disappointment when, waiting outside the locker room, only John, William, and Jeremy, and Alicia were waiting for him. Seeing the expression on his brother's face, William quickly made the connection and looked at his older brother apologetically.

"Sorry, brother," he apologized on Elicia's behalf. "She said her work at the university was probably going to keep her a little later than she expected," he explained.

Harry nodded morosely. That made sense…she did have her own goals to work towards, after all. In fact, that was why they had broken up to begin with, right? Harry suppressed the aching feeling in his chest and put on a content smile for his friends. "That's alright…you guys are here, right?" he said jovially, though William wasn't buying the act. Even so, he played along, if only for his brother's sake.

Hell, he was also playing along for Elicia's sake, in a way. He was fully aware that his brother's ex-girlfriend had been a total mess after Harry had left for Welbeck, and to an extent, still was. John had mentioned that he'd heard her crying in her dorm room several times, and when someone had idiotically badmouthed her boyfriend after the breakup—presumably as a way to hit on her—she'd hurt him so hard she actually had to be punished by the school for it—a first in her academic record. Personally, the fourteen-year-old couldn't understand why the two had broken up. In his mind, they were perfect for each other, and no matter what they both said to try and explain their situation to him, it sounded hollow to his ears. Still, his

parents hadn't bred family loyalty into him for nothing, and so he kept faithful to both his brother and the woman he knew his brother loved.

"So…" Jeremy spoke up, desperately trying to wash away the rising awkwardness. "Booze at the nearest pub?"

"I'm underage," William said deadpan.

"Sure, why not?" Harry agreed, seemingly ignoring his brother's protest. He needed a drink. Now.

London, United Kingdom, June 2002…

Harry sighed as he roamed the streets of London with his hands in his pockets, bored out of his skull. Another attempt to reconnect with Elicia on an emotional level had failed badly after the golden haired scientist-in-training had remembered she had results from an experiment coming in soon, and had excused herself right as their food had been arriving at the restaurant. Needless to say, he had not been in the mood to partake in the restaurant's doubtless delicious food, and had merely paid the bill and left, appreciating the sympathetic look on the waiter face as he all but rushed out the restaurant.

This epic failure had just been one of many as he vowed to try to regain the closeness he had with Elicia during the Liverpool College days. It helped enormously that it was a day off for him, but for some reason unknown to him, Elicia didn't seem to have any such thing.

At first, he'd dreaded that she was brushing him off for another guy—in which case he'd vowed he'd kill the bloke and vaporize the body with his much more powerful wandless fire magic—but William and John had been quick to disprove that theory. In fact, they had mentioned that every time he called her to set up such a "non-date," as apparently both he and Elicia called it, Elicia was the happiest they'd ever seen her. It truly seemed like she was just that forgetful about how booked her schedule was.

Even though that tid-bit of information always got him in a good mood, however, he was still aching for a good drink to get his mind off Elicia. Looking up, his eyes locked onto what looked like a dilapidated pub further ahead. He knew better than to judge by

appearances, however. This was London, after all, and pubs came in every shape and size. Sighing, he entered the pub and went straight for the counter, his head still bowed depressingly.

"Hey there, stranger," greeted the barkeep. "What can I get ya?"

"Strongest you've got, two shots," Harry mumbled out his order. Had he looked up, he would have seen the surprised look on the man's face, followed by a shrug. Soon enough, there were two shot glasses in front of Harry, both almost full to the brim with brownish-orange liquid that Harry swore he'd never seen. Shrugging, he picked one up figuring it was some sort of specialty brew and downed the shot in one go.

And then promptly wished he hadn't done such a fool thing as his throat, stomach, liver, and brain all protested at the sheer power of the foreign liquid. Hell, Harry was willing to bet his throat was scorched.

"W-What the hell is in this?" Harry gasped out, bumping himself in the chest a few times. "Gasoline?"

The barkeep gave a roaring laugh at the reaction—it was pretty much the same with any newcomer to the joys of Firewhiskey. "First time drinking the ol' Fire, eh?" he asked knowingly. "Can't say I've seen you around here either, stranger. New to town?"

Harry looked at the man askance. Was the man really claiming to know everyone in London? That seemed a little farfetched. "Kinda…I was here in London on business," he said smoothly. "But that didn't end well. Figured I'd drink my woes away."

The barkeep nodded sympathetically. "Well, I gotta say, it's something else to think that wizards outside of England have heard of my pub!" he exclaimed, ignoring the slight freeze in his customer's body language. "You can call me Tom, I'm the owner of this here fine establishment!"

Harry nervously shook the man's hand, doing a wonderful job at keeping his anxiety under wraps. Could it really be that he had, completely by accident, stumbled on the very society that had practically pushed his family into self-imposed exile? Was this a sign

of heavenly goodwill, or one of punishment for abandoning Elicia in favour of his bloodstained path of ambition?

Almost as a nervous reaction, he snapped the fingers of his free hand, emitting a very inconspicuous spark that passed unnoticed by all. If push came to shove, he might have to actually commit grand arson to escape, he figured. Thank goodness for those wandless exercises.

Harry carefully calculated his options for this unforeseen event. Here he was, in an honest-to-god magic establishment, with a potential way of accessing the mage world that he so wanted to crush. What should he do? Walk away, and reject this segregated world's teachings in the process? Take as much from them as he could and use their own knowledge against them at a future date? Inform his parents and let them decide? There was, after all, more at stake here than his own identity. If anyone found out that Harry Potter and Francis White were the same person, it would blow his family's cover as well. He could not allow that.

Still, the temptation was incredibly strong to ask for a way into the infamous Diagon Alley and raid their bookstores for valuable knowledge that he could then undermine them with. Not to mention the fact that the books he already had on magic might be out of date, thereby undermining his own training. That was unacceptable; he would not be weaker than any mage. Especially not if he wanted to enforce his will on them.

He was briefly reminded of the SAS' own motto, and felt a smile grow on his face, which the barkeep fortunately took as pleasure in meeting such a "distinguished" man as himself. He could never have guessed just how far from the truth he was.

"Ah, of course we've heard all about this fine pub," Harry assured the man with a charming smile. "One of the entries into Diagon Alley, if I'm not mistaken?" His intonation clearly showed that he did not believe he was.

Tom, sadly, had not the guile to see through his customer's wiles. "Of course!" he said proudly. "In fact, since you're new around here, why don't I show you?"

Harry smiled. "Much appreciated, sir," he thanked the barkeep.

Seeing the procedure to open the portal into Diagon Alley was just as intriguing to Harry as the infamous Alley itself. Putting everything he saw to memory, he thanked Tom and quickly made his way into Diagon Alley, first hitting the bank to exchange his regular bank notes into mage currency, and then hitting every bookstore he could find. Pretty soon, he was carrying several bags each weighing about twenty pounds, and to his astonishment, they weighed nothing at all to him. His militarized mind couldn't help but think of the hundreds of way such a spell could be used to enhance a lot of conventional weaponry.

He was about to call it a day—a very successful day—when his eye caught sight of what seemed like a magical gem shop. While he was personally uninterested in jewellery, his mind immediately thought up of Elicia, and her potential joy if she got such a trinket. Hell, he'd level the Alley if it meant she'd smile at him. The scary thing was, to his mind, that he could.

So, given this motivation, he quickly made his way into the store, where he was regaled by the look of hundreds of different looking gems of all sizes and colours. Thinking back on Elicia's likes and dislikes, he quickly ruled out red and yellow gems, since she admitted to hating her hair colour because it made everyone have lower expectations of her, and the dislike for the colour red was mainly because it reminded her of blood. Instead, he settled for a necklace with a blue sapphire, and jade earrings. When he was about to pay, however, he noticed something else…something intriguing. There was a small, transparent crystal growth sitting among the more precious gems, but was seemingly going unnoticed by every customer that went by it.

Following his eye, the cashier grinned. "Ah, nice eye," he praised. "Not many see the true worth of a fuel crystal," he noted.

Harry's attention was immediately on the man. "Fuel crystal?" he asked curiously. The cashier nodded.

"Admittedly, it's not a rare gem," the man conceded. "However, its use in our society is widespread to a level most don't even think about. Why, where do you think Floo Powder comes from? Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't appear at the wave of a wand; no sir, it's a refined product of fuel crystals."

Harry's eyes widened considerably at the revelation. He was well aware of Floo Powder and its widespread use in magical society, but he had been unable to conceive of a rational explanation as to how it worked. With an actual fuel crystal in his possession, he could perhaps deduce the inner workings of the Powder and even create it for his own use, or find other uses for it!

"How much for it?" Harry asked quickly. The cashier seemed stunned that the young man before him wanted such a universally rejected gem, but shrugged off his shock with a smile.

"Well…since no one else seems to be in a hurry to buy them, how about I sell you two of them for…say…two galleons, fifty-seven sickles, and fourteen knuts?" he proposed.

Harry had force himself not to whistle at the price. He knew the other gems he bought each cost about one galleon each, which, thanks to the exchange rate, came to about £20. However, in terms of their own economy, given that each knut was the mage equivalent of a cent, each sickle the equivalent of a single pound, and each galleon the equivalent of a hundred pounds, that meant quite a lot in the framework of their own economy. Still, as the exchange rate worked in his favour at the moment, he had no trouble dishing out the necessary money, much to the man's surprise, though he made no comment.

Thus, Harry was now the proud owner of two pieces of jewellery for his ex, two fuel crystals for his own experimentation, and a decent load of books for his own magical training.

All in all, a damned good day, considering how bad it started.

Liverpool, United Kingdom, July 2003…

"I don't believe you," Elicia's response was quick, disbelieving, and flat, as was her expression.

Harry sighed. "Ellie, listen to me, I'm not lying," he protested.

Elicia raised an eyebrow at his vehemence. When she had agreed to stay behind and help him clean up after his surprise birthday

party/Oxford University graduation party at his hotel room, she had not been expecting him to drop such a huge bomb on her.

"You're actually standing there and telling me that not only did you lie to me about your identity, but also hid the fact that you're actually a mage?" she asked incredulously, her arms crossed over her chest defensively.

Harry sighed and thanked the powers that be that he had the foresight to wait until everyone had left for this discussion. Only William, his parents, godfather, and sister knew what he had planned, and while they didn't exactly approve, they did support his decision, as family always did.

"I know it sounds crazy, Ellie, but I can prove it!" he told her. He needed her to believe him. Not just because he needed her skills, but because lying to her hurt him more than he had been able to admit to himself. Coming clean to her…it would cleanse him, in a way.

"Which one?" she asked sardonically. "That you're really not named Francis White, or that you can pull rabbits out of top hats?"

Harry sighed in frustration. "Damnit, Ellie, don't make this harder than it needs to be!"

Elicia threw her arms in the air. "Oh, sorry, am I making this too hard on you?" she mock apologized. "Here I was thinking that I was fully within my rights to freak out because the man I love apparently doesn't exist!" she exclaimed, a note of hysteria in her voice.

"I do exist, Ellie!" he protested, noting her lack of past tense in the word love with a hidden smile. "So I go by a different name in reality, big deal!"

Ellie poked him in the chest roughly. "It is a big deal, White! Potter! Or…whatever you're called!" she shot back. "We've known each other since we were twelve! I gave you my first kiss! My first time having sex was with you! And you lied to me all those years?" she demanded, tears now clearly visible in her eyes. "Did I mean so little to you?"

Harry was horrified by the direction Elicia's mental logic was going. "Of course not!" he protested…something that he seemed to be doing a lot these days. "Ellie, I love you more than I can bear at times! That I hid my real identity from you had nothing to do with us!"

"Then what did it have to do with?" she yelled at him. "What could possibly justify lying to me for eleven years?"

"My family, alright?" he yelled right back, at the edge of his own patience. "I did it to protect my family!"

Suddenly tired, Harry fell heavily onto the edge of his bed, bending down until his hands cupped his face, his elbows resting on his knees. "When I was one…some prick decided to kill my family," he told her, missing her look of horror at his confession. "Long story short, mom and dad managed to kill the bastard right back, but the guys my parents were fighting for were real bastards themselves…they would've used us as propaganda to get their own agendas through with minimal opposition," he explained, before giving a bitter laugh. "Hell, the evil prick's remaining forces might have even attempted to kill us in our sleep one night in revenge…I don't know," he admitted. "All I know is that mom and dad decided to call it quits with the UK and fled to the Continent, where we would go into hiding in some city or town…mostly for a few months, maybe a year or two if our luck held, and then moved somewhere else when those bastard mages here found us."

"So you changed your name to avoid detection," Elicia reasoned, and Harry now noticed she was kneeling beside him, her hand soothingly rubbing his arm. Oh, how it hurt him to have that beautiful face so close to him, and still be so out of his reach! "Why come back, then?"

Harry sighed. "Whatever our wishes were to keep in hiding, my dreams were to one day get the mages to back off…but for that I needed power. Political and military power…and they would only listen if that power came from home, not abroad," he explained. "I figured that out pretty young. So I convinced mom and dad to let me come to Liverpool College, despite their objections."

Elicia smiled. "I'm glad you did," she whispered.

Harry smiled as he turned his head to look straight into her eyes. "So am I."

"So why tell me now?" she asked suddenly, curiosity—not resentment—flooding her eyes. "What changed?"

Harry smiled softly at her. "You did," he said simply, much to her confusion. "I never, ever expected you to come into my life the way you did," he explained. "But you did, and I'm thankful every day for it. Lying to you hurt me more than I thought I could bear…so I decided to come clean, you know?"

Elicia smiled at him tolerantly. "You're still the same idiot I knew from back then in the hallway…" she sighed nostalgically. "All natural charm, no ruthlessness…honestly, what am I going to do with you?" she asked with a patient smile.

"You could take me back?" he suggested wryly.

Elicia's smile dropped for a second before it came back. "You know we can't," she told him. "You have your dreams, I have mine…and I can't follow you down that bloodstained road," she said softly. "Please don't make me do so."

Harry smiled ruefully at her obvious answer, and raised her chin with a finger so that her eyes would meet his. "You know I'd never do that," he whispered to her. "You, Elicia Maria Eisenheim, are everything to me."

She smiled tearfully. "I don't suppose that means I can convince you to drop your little crusade and live a peaceful life with me?" she asked knowingly.

Harry returned the smile. "You know I can't," he echoed her previous words. "But I swear, I'll do everything in my power to make the new world as perfect for you as I feasibly can."

"Such a romantic…" she sighed with a rueful smile. "God must hate dreamers like us."

Harry shook his head. "I think he must really love us," he disagreed, piquing her curiosity.

"Why's that?"

Harry smiled and leaned forward to give her a kiss on the lips. "Because he let us have wonderful years together," he whispered before pressing his lips to hers gently.

Sandhurst, United Kingdom, 2004…

Harry really didn't like the look on the faces of his superiors.

Early in the morning, he had been summoned before what he had gathered was a secret panel of high-ranking brass. While the details were sketchy to him, he did note that other than himself and the officers in question, plus two men who looked to be from the SAS as guards, they were completely alone, which was non-standard for a formal military hearing. Not that he was worried about such a thing—he knew he hadn't done anything against regulations.

"Cadet White…or, should I say, Second Lieutenant White," started the officer in the middle of the ten-man panel. He looked to be about sixty, and had a full, snow-white beard to go with his equally white, perfectly groomed hair. The stars on his shoulder lapels denoted him a Major General. "First of all, allow me to congratulate you, on behalf of this panel, for your outstanding service record while at Sandhurst. Truly remarkable, lieutenant."

Harry stiffened and saluted, as was protocol. "Thank you, sir!"

The man waved away the formal thanks. "However, as you may have gathered, we do not simply gather a panel of the most influential officers of Her Majesty's Army to congratulate successful officers in private," the man noted Harry's unsurprised look. "Good lad. That's a good head on your shoulders."

The man next to the Major General, this one a Lieutenant General, nodded. "Quite so. As Major General Fording was explaining, this sort of panel is typically called when not only do we find remarkable officers, but ones that are apparently not who they say they are."

Harry stiffened slightly at the unsaid accusation. "Sir?"

"Lying to the government, and most importantly, to your superiors is a court-martial worthy offence, lieutenant White," another man

reminded him, this one a Major General as well. "Or, should we say, mister Harry Potter?"

Harry felt all sorts of alarms ring in his head at the revelation that they knew who he was. It was pointless now to keep lying. "…May I ask how, sirs?" he asked simply.

"Do not underestimate the reach and power of the British military, mister Potter," warned the same Lieutenant General as before. "While we have known about this information throughout your stay at Welbeck, and then Oxford, and then here at Sandhurst, we have decided not to prosecute you based on it. Do you know why?"

Harry's logical mind did not need much time to come up with the obvious answer. "You realize that a mage under Army control is of more use than one under the control of the mages," he stated neutrally.

The Major General at the centre looked surprised, but also quite admiring that the boy before him had managed to come to the correct conclusion. "Indeed, though perhaps not in such words," he conceded.

"Permission to speak freely, sirs?" asked Harry. The panel seemed to confer for a few seconds before the Major General waved his hand in approval. "Thank you. Sirs, while I am indeed a mage, my first loyalty is to my family," he told them in no uncertain terms. "However, that being said, my second and last is to my country. I will be whatever Britain needs me to be to secure her borders and bring its populace the security it deserves. If that means, as I believe it does in this case, that I become a human weapon, then so be it."

The panel was quiet for a few moments before the Lieutenant General leaned forward onto his awaiting, linked hands. "Is that all, Lieutenant White?" he asked.

Harry nodded once, noting with joy that the man chose to address him by his earned rank and his public identity. It was a tacit approval of his words if nothing else, and a promise to keep his identity a secret, thereby safeguarding his family from mage intervention.

"One last question, Lieutenant, before we adjourn," piped up the Major General in the centre.

"Sir?"

"Why do you hide from the mages?" asked the old man.

Harry's posture stiffened, greatly increasing the panel's curiosity. "Sirs, they have tormented my family for years, so that we could become mere shadows of people for their benefit. They seek only to profit themselves, without regard for their non-mage brethren. I will not serve them," he answered vehemently.

The panel looked at each other and deliberated in hushed whispers for a moment before the Major General nodded and looked at Harry. "Very well, Lieutenant. Thank you for your patience," he said. "I understand you wish to stay on for a few more years to complete your studies in…" he looked at a paper before him. "…War Studies and Defence and International Affairs? Please explain?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. I am working on a thesis I believe will aid the military substantially, and I need the resources here to allow me to complete it," he explained.

The Major General nodded and, almost boringly, stamped something on the paper before him. "Approved, Lieutenant. Good luck. We'll be expecting great things from you."

Harry stiffened and saluted. "Yes, sir!"

Liverpool, United Kingdom, 2005…

"I still can't believe they actually elected you,"

"Ouch, pup, that hurts!" Sirius complained dramatically.

Harry rolled his eyes at the spectacle Sirius was making. Thankfully, they weren't in a public space, but rather at Sirius' flat, celebrating Sirius' election to Member of Parliament for Liverpool a few hours ago. It had been a tough thing to bring about, considering the years he'd been gone from the UK, but two years ago, he'd been smuggled back into England under the assumed name of Michael White, Harry's supposed uncle, and quickly made a name for himself as a pragmatic, yet charismatic leader with deep pockets. His entire persona seemed rather an extension of his real identity,

but since the public seemed to love him for it, Harry couldn't complain.

"Harry, be nice to your uncle," Elicia chastised him gently at his side on the couch. "It's quite an achievement, getting elected to Parliament."

Harry sighed…even broken up, she still had him wrapped around her finger. "Fine, fine…sorry for being disbelieving about your victory, Sirius," he apologized blandly.

Sirius was all smiles, however. "No worries, Harry!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "How could they not vote this sexy piece of man flesh to Parliament, after all I've done for the community?" he asked just a mite arrogantly.

Now it was Elicia's turn to look disbelieving. "I apologize, Sirius, but by what era's standards are we going by to call you a sexy piece of man flesh?" she asked sardonically. "The sixties, perhaps?"

Sirius made a huge spectacle of looking physically wounded by the sarcastic remark, while Harry laughed uproariously at Elicia's spot on comment. "Oh wow, Sirius…you got told."

Sirius huffed. "Kids these days…no appreciation for finely matured men like myself!"

Harry suddenly leaned forward, his expression all business. "More importantly, Sirius, did you manage to dig up the information I asked for?" he asked seriously.

Sirius nodded, his expression equally all business. "Of course," he replied with a smug smirk as he reached for the insides of the briefcase at the side of his chair. "James and Lily have really been at work at spreading their contacts around mage society, so it was easy to get such low priority information." He tossed a folder at Harry, who deftly caught it.

"What is it?" asked Elicia, curious about what would make Harry look so serious.

"Fuel crystal deposit locations," Sirius said before Harry could. "Commonly used to produce what we call Floo Powder…a

substance used to allow anyone with it to use a connected fireplace to teleport to another such fireplace in seconds."

Elicia's eyes widened. "That's…amazing!"

Sirius nodded and nudged his head at his godson, who was pouring over the information inside the folder. "He's been obsessed about studying them since he found one at a gem shop a few years back," he told his godson's ex…a situation he found quite intriguing, considering the fact that he could see the obvious attraction between the two.

Immediately, her hand seemed to reach for the sapphire pendant around her neck. Having noted the action, Harry nodded at her.

"I got the crystals at the same place I got you that and the jade earrings," he confirmed. Elicia seemed put out by this information.

"And you never let me in on your pet project?" she asked disappointedly. "Harry, I make my living off of stuff like this!"

Harry gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry, Ellie, must've slipped my mind…" he said genuinely. "Look, either way, I've made so little progress on them that I might as well not have started to begin with!"

Sirius raised an eyebrow at that. "That's not the impression you gave James and Lily," he noted.

Harry shrugged. "Those were theoretical uses I deduced after minimal observation. The real, experimental stuff I've had no luck with."

Elicia grinned at him. "Let me in on it, then!" she suggested excitedly. "I've got the equipment needed to do all kinds of crazy things! Heck, I could even pass it off as university research!"

Harry looked at Elicia warily. "Are you sure?" he asked with some concern. "I mean, I'm not even aware of most of the crystal's properties…it could be dangerous."

Elicia waved away his concern, to Sirius' silent amusement. "There's plenty of danger in any project I work on," she assured him, which

oddly enough produced the exact opposite effect in him. "I only have one condition, though."

Harry and Sirius both raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

She nodded seriously. "I want to be able to publish the results," she stated plainly. Seeing Sirius well on his way to vocalize a protest, she quickly amended her words. "I don't care when, or how…but you have to let me publish the results. Please!"

Harry looked at Elicia ponderingly for a moment before realizing why she was making such a desperate plea to them. "You want to use this to vindicate your family, don't you?" he asked softly.

Elicia looked at him. "Brilliant as always," she said with a smile.

Sirius, however, was not quite as compassionate on this. "That's all well and nice, but to publish the results on what is obviously a magical element would blow all our covers, don't you think?" he asked shrewdly. "Dumbledore and his goons would be on us in record time, nevermind the Ministry Aurors!"

"Magic will eventually be revealed to the world, Sirius," Harry reminded him. "That's the plan, remember?"

Sirius nodded. "Oh, I remember. I also remember that we all agreed to follow your plan on the condition that it didn't massively jeopardize our covers outside the realm of necessity!" he shot back. "I get why I have to be in Parliament, and I'll follow my role as much as need be for you, Harry. I even get why you're going to such great lengths to recruit a horde of followers already! However, I don't get why we have to risk our necks experimenting on a magical element in what will obviously be a non-magical location! The Ministry is certain to get its monitors pinged!"

"We can hide the magical signature behind wards," Harry countered.

"Oh?" asked Sirius sceptically. "And how will you explain to the Ministry why there's an anti-detection ward being cast over the University of Liverpool?"

Harry grimaced; he hadn't thought of that. Then, inspiration struck him. "What about that old house in London you told me you had?" he asked.

Sirius blinked in confusion. "What? Grimmauld Place?" he asked with distaste. "What on earth could you possibly want to do in that black hole of misery and hate?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "It's hidden, right?" he asked.

Sirius shrugged, but nodded all the same. "That's right. A Fidelius was cast on it and kept in the family. I'm the current Secret Keeper," he replied.

"Couldn't we set up whatever machinery Ellie might need to do experimentation there?" he asked. "It's already cloaked, so no one would be the wiser, and we wouldn't need to cast a new one elsewhere!"

Sirius blinked at the surprisingly simple logic. "It…could work," he admitted, rubbing his chin. "Though we'd have to shield the machinery from magic, if only to just cross the wards…they might fry, otherwise."

Harry grinned at Elicia. "How about it?" he asked.

Elicia looked uncertain, however. "I…don't get to London all that much, though," she protested mildly.

Sirius nodded. "Good," he stated. Seeing their surprised expressions, he sighed and elaborated. "Ms. Eisenheim, besides the fact that my family's ancestral home is barely liveable for any living being, it would also work to our advantage if your visible visits there were few and far between, as doing so would arouse less suspicion from elements in our world who might be watching the place for signs that I have come back to England."

Harry blinked. "But then, how do we get her and the equipment inside?" he asked.

Sirius smiled. "You and I can get the equipment into the house via the front door, since the magic of the Fidelius will get them to ignore our presence once we cross into its target area, and we only need to

do the trip once," he explained. "Ms. Eisenheim, on the other hand, we can provide with a Portkey for her to use whenever she is in London…ostensibly for whatever personal reasons she has."

Harry gently smacked an open palm with his closed fist. "I see! If she uses the Portkey from, say, her hotel room, no one will see her around Grimmauld Place, and thus have no reasons to suspect her!" he reasoned. "Because no matter how many times the magic makes them ignore where she's gone, if the mages realize that it's happening too many times in a row, and it's always her, she'd be immediately suspected of knowing where your house is!"

Sirius nodded, pleased his godson had caught on so quickly. "Quite so," he agreed. "Since there are so many mages in London to begin with, her using the Portkey in her hotel room wouldn't even register as an anomaly for the Ministry."

Elicia, for her part, looked like she might have a headache. "This is all so very confusing…" she admitted with a pained smile towards Harry. "I can see why you were reluctant to tell me about this other side of you now," she admitted.

Harry smiled gently back at her, further confusing Sirius as to why they were not together. "It's not so bad…" he assured her.

Sirius scoffed. "You want to know what's confusing?" he asked rhetorically. "You two! I swear, you've got to be the most perfect couple I've ever seen, and you keep dancing around each other like your lives depend on not getting together!" he exclaimed exasperatedly.

Well, no one could exactly accuse Sirius of being restrained about his opinions.

Liverpool, United Kingdom, January 5th, 2008…

"Can you believe the fuss those Spaniards are making about Gibraltar?" asked Harry incredulously as he read the paper in Elicia's kitchen, fully aware that he was simply wearing boxers after another night of incredible sex. "You'd think the very existence of their country was prevaricated on them getting back a piece of land about the size of London!"

Elicia hummed an agreement as she entered the kitchen in a robe, kissing her ex lovingly on the cheek. "They do seem rather obsessed, don't they?" she agreed, grabbing a plate of the delicious looking breakfast her wonderful ex had cooked up as an after-sex/breakfast meal.

Harry grunted. "Only one term in power, and this new party thinks it's important enough to boss around an entire country," he commented incredulously. "You've got to hand it to them, though…they've got stones."

"Language," Elicia chastised him.

"Sorry, sorry…"

"So," she said casually as she spread some strawberry jam on her toast, "when does your leave end?"

Harry put down the paper and looked at her curiously. "About six hours, why?" he asked.

Elicia's eyes had a mischievous look in them that Harry both liked and feared. "Oh, I don't know…I guess I was thinking how it would be nice to…you know...indulge ourselves and maybe…stay in bed a while…relaxing," she purred into his ear, making him shiver, especially since her breath now smelled of strawberries. Damn the woman for being this attractive!

Harry grinned at her. "Well, I've certainly heard worse plans for leave days," he joked. "And yours sounds positively…delicious, my dear Ellie."

Elicia smiled at him and leaned in for a kiss when they sprung apart at the sound of the phone ringing.

"Ignore it," Harry said as he leaned in again. They never made it to a kiss, however, as now his cell phone was also ringing, followed quickly by Elicia's. The resulting cacophony of every phone in the room ringing at the same time pretty much shot down their chance to proceed with Elicia's scrumptious plan for the day.

Angrily, Harry huffed and went for his cell phone, while Elicia rushed to answer the main line, ignoring the beeping of her cell phone.

"What?" Harry barked angrily into his phone.

"Francis, what the hell took you so long, man?" Harry heard John say over the phone. "Quick, do you have a radio or TV nearby?"

Harry frowned in confusion. "TV, why?" he asked curiously.

"Put on the BBC, quick! It's…incredible!"

Harry glared at the phone. "John, if this is your idea of fun…" he warned.

"Francis, just do it! I promise you this is important! Shit, gotta go…do it, man! Check the news!" The phone suddenly clicked before the tell-tale sound of rhythmic beeping replaced John's voice, signalling he had hung up.

Growling under his breath, he turned towards Elicia, who had paled dramatically as she seemingly listened to whatever was being said on the phone. When he met her eyes, she merely seemed to pale even more, until she looked more like a ghost than a human being.

"Ellie?" he asked worriedly. "What's wrong?"

Elicia muttered goodbyes in the phone quickly before hanging up and rushing over to him, hugging him for all he was worth. He couldn't make out what she was saying, unfortunately, as she was too busy sobbing her soul out into his naked chest.

"Ellie, love!" he tried again. "What's wrong?"

Shakily, she pointed to the TV. "T…Turn it on," she requested weakly.

Harry shook his head. "Not before we sit you down, come on," he ordered, gently leading her to the sofa and sitting her there, where she then proceeded to hide her face in her hands and sob once more.

Now incredibly worried as to what could have possibly caused this sort of behaviour in the usually lively woman he loved, Harry quickly

went to the TV and turned it on, quickly changing the channels to the BBC's news channel. What he saw there changed his world.

On the screen were pictures of what seemed to be a battlefield, streaming live from wherever it was going on. Corpses were clearly visible on the ground, as were multiple impact craters and destroyed small-arm weaponry.

"…completely by surprise!" someone—the correspondent streaming the video, he guessed—was shouting as the sound of a shell exploding nearby made the man then scream in terror. "…no warning whatsoever! Initial casualties are high, but we are holding on, for now!"

Harry sat down heavily beside Elicia, his mouth opening and closing by its own volition, his mind shocked at what he was seeing. What was going on? Where was this?

The scene quickly changed from the battlefield to the BBC's main studio, where the anchormen seemed just as shocked at the scene of the bloody battlefield. It took what sounded like a muffled cough for them to snap out of it and shakily return their attention to the cameras.

"...As you can see, dear viewers, initial reports of hostilities have not been erroneous," the lead anchorman was saying shakily. "As reported by the Ministry of Defence, Gibraltar has come under attack by Spanish forces."

Harry's jaw dropped in shock. Wasn't he moments ago just reading how the Ultranationalists in Spain were pushing for a diplomatic solution to the Gibraltar issue?

"…What's that? I see…" the anchorman seemed to be talking to someone off stage via a small microphone in his ear. He quickly returned his attention to the camera. "Dear audience, I apologize for the interruption, but we are going live to Parliament, where the Prime Minister is about to address the nation in this time of crisis."

As pronounced, the scene on the telly shifted over to the House of Commons, which seemed much fuller than usual. Considering the circumstances, of course, that made sense. At the middle of the chamber, the Prime Minister could be seen standing before the

wooden separator that divided the chamber between Government and Opposition, obviously going through last minute details on his speech. When the Prime Minister seemed ready to speak, he looked up just as the camera angle shifted so that the audience could see him from the front.

"…My fellow countrymen," the man began solemnly. "…I understand that for many of us, the concept of war between fellow, civilized nations is about as absurd as it was for our ancestors who lived during the rise of Nazi Germany," he said. "Yet nonetheless, here we are. January fifth, two thousand-eight, a date that began like any other in this post-Soviet world…a world we were promised to be peaceful and prosperous. Now, it will forever be a day we look back on with bitter tears and broken dreams, as the winds of war sweep our nation back onto the battlefield of Europe once more."

Harry watched the man take a breath, and in that instant, his cell phone rang. He didn't need to see the caller ID before he knew exactly who it was. "Captain White speaking," he spoke seriously. "Uh-huh…yeah…I'll be there, sir. See you then."

"…This was not to be our lives…war, we were told, was to become a thing of the past, now that we had won the clash of civilizations. But these promises have been broken, torn to shreds by evil men with malevolent intentions foremost in their hearts and minds," the Prime Minister continued. "As of four o'clock this morning, as you all know, Spanish armed forces, under the direction of the dastardly central government, have invaded Gibraltar, with the full intention of forcibly claiming this territory for themselves, at the cost of the thousands of British lives living therein."

Boos could be heard throughout the Commons chamber, and Harry was hard pressed not to join in. "But in doing so, they have misjudged us!" the Prime Minister's voice rose several octaves as he wound himself up. "They see our current size, and think that the British spirit has been broken—that we have become shadows of our Imperial past! That we would turn the other cheek and look away from the evil deeds being done to our people miles away! They are wrong!"

"For a thousand years, Britain has been the balancer of Europe. When the Continent set itself aflame, we would keep the balance. When their squabbles became more, we stepped in and kept the

lines. When it threatened to consume the world twice over in tides of hatred and bigotry, we held the line!" the Prime Minister emphasized his statement by banging the podium four times with his fist, to the cheers of the assembled people in the chamber. "And we will still hold the line! I say, the spirit of Britannia is not, as the Spanish may believe, put out, but rather waiting to be rekindled—ready to light the way for the civilized world when honoured deeds and justice are forsaken by the world! And so, I ask Parliament now, will we lie down and take this insult to our people, or will be stand up, and as one protest this most vile intrusion into our hard-earned peace, and throw the Spanish back, with a lesson they will never forget?"

The House of Commons erupted into a mixture of cheers from all sides as the indignity of the Spanish surprise assault rallied them behind the Prime Minister, disregarding any former disagreements over policy or ideology. Right now, there were no Tories, no Labour, no Liberal Democrats. There were only Britons in the House of Commons at the moment, and they were all baying for blood.

For his part, however, Harry kissed Elicia lovingly on the temple before hurrying to her room, where he quickly gathered his uniform and travelling clothes. He had to get to the nearest train station as quick as possible. Coming back out to the living room, he saw her still on the couch, watching the slow descent of their peaceful lives into the bloody abyss of war.

"Ellie, I have to go," he called out to her. "Regiment's being moved to the coast for now, but it's likely we're getting deployed soon."

Slowly, Elicia rose from her seat and walked over to him, suddenly embracing him tightly. Smiling slightly, Harry reciprocated with a tight hug of his own.

"Come back to me," he heard her whisper.

"I promise," he whispered right back, before they both pulled back enough to allow them to give each other a searing goodbye kiss. Leaning his forehead against hers, he gave her a shy smile—something she hadn't seen in years. "I love you," he told her sincerely.

She smiled back at him tearfully. "I love you too," she replied, just as honestly.

With that, he pulled out of the embrace and quickly left out the front door, while Elicia went back to the couch and sobbed into her hands, ignoring the scene playing out on the TV screen.

Seeing the overwhelming support for him, the Prime Minister nodded thankfully and made a gesture for quiet, which he slowly got.

"Thank you, my fellow countrymen," he said genuinely. "Then, as of this moment, I am declaring that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is officially in a state of war with the Kingdom of Spain until such a time when the enemy or ourselves are crushed."

The man took a long breath and sighed, closing his eyes in reluctant acceptance of the situation that had befallen his term in office. "May God have mercy on our souls."

Post-AN: Just to preempt what I suspect will be a question repeated over and over again in reviews, or maybe just in the readers' heads,

Why Harry was not identified at the Leaky Cauldron: Tom hasn't seen James Potter or Lily Potter in 22 years. Add to that the fact that 22-year old, post-Welbeck Harry would look more robust and square-faced than James, and you've got a nice little case of mistaken identity going on. Seeing as how the rest of the Ministry is under the impression that the Potters are all on the continent, there would also be no reason for them to intensify searches as home (meaning no posters and the like along Diagon Alley).

Also; Yes: This will be the format used for the following chapters, as the time period that needs to be covered is roughly 35 year in total. As with this chapter, the appropriately important parts will have longer sections, but otherwise the format stays.

Other notes:

1. Elicia Maria Eisenheim: As King of Vaypouria might attest, Elicia Maria Eisenheim was not an originally intended character for this story. In fact, she was originally supposed to be, 1) a guy; and 2) so very not a romantic interest. It was only after actually writing the scenes she was in that I realized, apparently somewhat late

considering my friend's reaction to the news I'd changed her role, that she was perfect as a romantic interest. So I did, and the story will be that much more emotionally charged for it, I believe. For the record, though: yes, Elicia will be a significant character throughout the story.

2. Romance: "Emperor" is not, as one might think after reading this chapter, a Romance-intensive story. The only reason for the amount I've shown in this chapter is the fact that it serves as the jumping point for Harry's motivation for becoming Emperor and the motivation for the methods he becomes willing to employ to get there.

3. Country Animosities: During the Dark Wars Series, the country that got the short end of the stick was the United States. This time, it's Spain, for now. However, this does not imply any sort of hatred on my part for either nation. While I have my issues with the US government, the people within the United States do not have my hatred, and as a descendant of Spain, I hold no ill will towards what I consider my family's ancestral homeland. Please keep that in mind before launching insulting reviews based on perceived personal animosities towards particular countries.

As always, please review.

-MB

Gibraltar, United Kingdom Overseas Territory, June 2008…

"Jesus Christ…"

Harry couldn't help but silently agree with the soldier's remark from behind him. Gibraltar was a bloody mess. Hell, even that didn't seem good enough an explanation of how bad things looked.

Bombed out buildings seemed to dominate the landscape as they disembarked from the Royal Navy ships. In the distance, they could even see pillars of smoke emanating from what would have been downtown Gibraltar, but now simply looked like just another battlefield to the group of military men.

"Dons really let them have it, huh?" he heard a soldier whisper to another.

"Fucking bastards," the soldier's companion agreed.

Harry could have ordered the soldiers to remain silent, but he didn't have the heart to do it, not when he himself was experiencing some measure of shock at the sight before him. This was, after all, his first real taste of war, and it completely dumbfounded him. Wasn't it accepted that militaries could no longer indiscriminately bomb civilian areas? Wasn't there supposed to be some sort of code of conduct? Rules of war, and the like?

At the bottom of the landing ramp, he spotted one of the other Captains in the regiment and waved at him when the Captain looked up and spotted him.

"Potter," the man greeted. Harry nodded back, and turned to give orders to his men.

"Meet up with Major Miles at the planned briefing station," he ordered. "I'll be along shortly."

The senior lieutenant of the group went rigid and saluted, followed by the rest of the Company. "Yes, sir!" he barked, before turning and ordering the men to follow him, which they did without protest.

Turning his attention back to his fellow Captain, Harry looked around a bit before resting his eyes back on the man. "What the hell happened here?" he asked.

The man shrugged. "You're looking at the work of the Spanish fleet," he stated uncaringly as he lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag. "Whatever the mortar teams on the other side of the Wall couldn't hit, the ships took care of. It's a damn miracle there's as many survivors as there are."

Harry nodded. The Wall his colleague was referring to was a thing of legend in the British military. Spanning the whole width of the peninsula, it was a giant, ten-stories tall concrete-and-steel wall about two city blocks wide that the British had built to separate Gibraltar from Spain during the post-World War II years, just in case Franco had decided to go looking for trouble. The inner workings of the wall were common knowledge to the garrison forces, but a complete secret to anyone outside the Gibraltar garrison. It essentially made land-based attacks into Gibraltar absolutely impossible.

Of course, at the same time, no one had expected that the post-Franco Spanish governments would then decide to bomb the tiny peninsula from the sea.

"It's unreal, isn't it?" asked the man after he blew out some smoke. "You always figure shite like this will be someone else's problem…and BAM! When it hits you, you can't help but stay staring at the mess, wondering where it all went wrong."

Harry nodded slowly. "Do we know how many of the garrison are alive?" he asked.

"Word has it that most of them were holed up in the Wall when the Dons decided to redecorate, so for the most part, they're okay. It's the civvies that got hammered," the Captain reported. "About fifteen thousand lost, last I heard."

Harry whistled appreciatively. "Christ…that's about half of them, then," he breathed.

The man nodded. "Major Polk says the only reason the rest of them made it through the barrage was because the garrison opened up

the wall for them to take refuge inside," he relayed. "Still…they took the place completely by surprise."

Harry nodded, looking over to where he could still see the plumes of black smoke rising from the civilian sector. "Hard to believe the Dons haven't invaded yet, considering the damage," he noted.

The Captain nodded with a smirk. "Shore batteries. Kept the bastards good and far while we high-tailed it out here," he explained, motioning to what were now smoking wrecks of concrete and bent steel. "Last one gave out just as our lads closed in with the Spanish fleet. Probably saved the colony, they did."

"Any survivors?"

The man shook his head. "Not a one, s'far as we can tell," he replied dully. "Bastards killed them to the man."

Harry nodded, a grimace gracing his face as he realized that it was probably the only logical end result to the amount of damage that the batteries would have needed to take before they gave out.

"Bet the lads'll be all fired up to take the fight to the Dons after this," he muttered. "What about your boys, Speirs? How are they taking this?"

Speirs shrugged. "Not well," he said simply. "A couple of them had relatives here, and the news spread through the company. The whole lot of them are revved up to kill some Dons."

"And you?"

Speirs shrugged again. "This isn't my first war, and it's not likely to be the last," he stated evenly. "First time, I was in Rwanda with the expeditionary forces in ninety-four. Had to stop ourselves a bona-fide genocide from happening. We kinda succeeded, I guess," he recalled, ending with a shrug. "Good way as any to pop my war cherry, anyway."

"Kinda succeeded?" Harry parroted, curious.

Speirs shrugged. "The brass called it a success. Dunno how those twenty thousand dead felt, though."

Gibraltar, United Kingdom Overseas Territory, October 2008…

Harry barely looked up as dust fell on the latest letter to come from home, the sound of an explosion dully muffled by the concrete between him and it.

Like the rest of the company, he was quartered in an underground bunker within the Rock of Gibraltar, and for the most part stayed there while the Spanish mortar teams and artillery kept up their determined campaign to turn the small peninsula into hell on earth. So far, they had succeeded in forcing the British forces underground, but they had not counted on the fact that the Rock bunker had been connected to the Wall via underground passageways. As such, there was very little need for the British to ever come out into the open.

A knock on the open door to his private quarters—one of the perks of being a commissioned officer—got him to look up, and he smiled weakly at the sight of his superior officer, Major Michael "Speedy" Miles.

"News from home?" asked the Major with a knowing smile.

Harry nodded. "Just Elicia keeping me up to date," he informed Miles. "Sounds like Isabella is going to Canada to study," he noted. "Mum and Dad are worried that the war may spread into the Isles themselves, so she can't stay there. They'll be going with her, too, just in case."

Miles nodded, having been informed of Harry's family and particular circumstances, mostly due to the fact that Harry could be called on by the brass for a special performance at any time, which would leave him temporarily without a second-in-command. "And William?"

Harry shrugged. "Sounds like he's staying in England," he replied evenly as he read further into the letter. "He's twenty three years old, sir—old enough to make his own decisions, I suppose."

"Where's he working?"

Harry scanned the letter. "Looks like he enrolled at Trinity College to get his postgraduate degree in Political Theory," he said before

narrowing his eyes to make sure he got the next part right. "…and he's become day manager of a restaurant near the College."

"Following in the footsteps of his big brother, then, eh?" noted the Major.

"Never got my graduate degrees, sir," Harry reminded his superior idly. "And I sure as hell don't remember working in a restaurant. I could burn water," he noted sardonically.

The Major gave a cheerful, booming laugh. Harry didn't mind it—it was the way the Major was. Cheerful, optimistic, compassionate to his men—it was why Harry enjoyed working with him. He didn't push his men away, instead trying to connect to each of them on a personal level—much like what he was doing now with him. His one fault, if you could call it that?

"Say, that cute little girl of yours wouldn't know of any…single ladies, would she?" asked the Major with a leer.

The Major was a pervert.

Well, maybe that was a bit of an unfair characterization. It wasn't that he was always flipping up skirts, or trying to peek in women's bathrooms. He didn't stalk, or come on too strong. He wasn't a creepy pervert…he just had a rather slightly-more-than-healthy appreciation for the female sex. Which was damned odd to the people that didn't know him very well, as common sense dictated that such behaviour would inevitably contradict his seemingly dominant sense of chivalry.

Oddly, it didn't.

Harry sighed, lowering the letter to make eye contact with his superior, a tolerant smile on his face. "Sorry, sir," he apologized without any real empathy. "Ellie's social life tends to be restricted to childhood friends and workplace co-workers. Most of which, in both cases, have either married, or are taken."

The Major made a big show of snapping his fingers in disappointment, which Harry knew better than to take to heart. Probably every member of the company had by now seen this act so often that they knew it to be just a game for him; a way to alleviate

any tension that might have built up from his unorthodox counselling or simple chit-chat. In Harry's case, he knew the Major had done it to try and dispel the loneliness he was feeling, now that he didn't get to go to sleep some nights with Ellie at his side. While he gave props to the Major for trying, it didn't really work, however.

"I doubt you came all this way just to chat, sir," Harry then said, folding the letter and tucking it inside his breast pocket for later perusal. "Do we have new orders?"

The Major frowned at him but then gave a lopsided smile. "Perceptive, White. Good, good," he praised. "You're right. 51st Regiment is coming off the wall in four hours. Guess who's been tapped to take their place?"

Harry sighed. "I'll tell the men," he offered as he got up from his bunk. "Unless you've already done so, sir?" he asked, gazing at his superior searchingly.

The Major shook his head. "Haven't had the chance yet. The order just came in from Fording."

Harry grunted in passing acknowledgement. General Fording was, to practically all of the twelve regiments now stationed in Gibraltar, one of the most incompetent officers they had ever had the displeasure of serving under. It wasn't that he was cruel, or wilfully disregarded his men's lives as cannon fodder—he was simply bad at war. He had no skill in tactics or strategy, and whenever he tried to run the logistics, something always got bollixed up.

Of course, the story of how he got the generalship of this expedition was common knowledge throughout the detachment, even though it was technically supposed to be top secret. Simply put, Fording was someone in government's favourite lap dog, and Fording had gotten glowing recommendations in Parliament that made it impossible for the military brass to not pick him for the job, despite the fact that he was among the worst in the upper ranks—and he knew it.

Well, to be fair, he did have a few redeeming qualities. Fording didn't treat his men like toys, for one. Like Major Miles, he was well liked as a person among the troops, but unlike Miles, was disliked as a commanding officer. He was also painfully aware as to his shortcomings, so he more often than not listened to his advisors and

picked the suggestion that seemed to make most sense to him. Plus, given his lack of thorough understanding of tactics and strategy, he had adopted the mantra of "the best offense is a good defence"—presumably until someone wised up on his shortcomings.

In this particular case, it was likely that their commanding officer, Colonel Strider, had given some form of glowing praise for the 75th Regiment, nicknamed "the Liverpudlians," as all of its members had been drawn from Liverpool. Normally, that would be reason for chest thumping and glowing pride, but in this case, it was a job none of the lads, not even him, wanted. Manning the Wall was essentially considered to be the one duty where you had a damn good chance of dying, as it required everyone on top to either provide covering fire for the artillerists, or required the Regiment to man the artillery pieces themselves if the crews were killed. So far, in the past month, they had already lost about 200 men to Wall duty—his own regiment having lost about 14 of those. Arguably, that was an incredibly small number, but for modern warfare, it was already too many.

"Same formation as last time?" asked Harry as he moved over to his cheap wooden desk to retrieve the helmet on top. He saw the Major nod from the corner of his eye.

"Aye. Let the other companies worry about covering fire. We've got babysitting duty this time around."

Harry nodded silently, his outstretched hand still on the helmet on his desk. "When do you figure the siege will end?" he asked suddenly, and felt, more than saw, the Major shrug.

"Way I see it, White, the only way the siege will end is if Whitehall decides to launch a strike along the northern coast," the Major replied.

Harry snorted. "What are the odds of that happening anytime soon?" he muttered.

HMS Swift, Bay of Biscay, Atlantic Ocean, January 27th, 2009…

"Hey, White?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Remember when you asked what the odds were of Whitehall launching an amphibious attack on the northern coast of Spain?"

Harry sighed. "With all due respect, sir, shut up."

Major Miles laughed as he and his subordinate watched the fierce waters of the Bay of Biscay rock the ship every which way. It wasn't even stormy, and yet the waters were horribly choppy.

Harry sighed again. The past few weeks had been something of a whirlwind. First of all, garrison duty at the Wall of Gibraltar had become so repetitive for most of the men that, even though they'd been there less than a year, they already knew every nook and cranny the Wall had to offer. Added to that was the monotony of waiting for their turn on the Wall, coupled with almost zero avenues of entertainment, and the 75th Regiment was just about ready to blow its brains out from boredom.

Then, not a week ago, word had come that that the Royal Navy had scored a great victory off the Gulf of Cadiz, scattering the Spanish Navy's blockade, but not ultimately destroying them—much to everyone's chagrin in Gibraltar. At the very least, however, it had given the authorities time enough to begin a mass evacuation of the civilians still trapped in Gibraltar, and the 75th Regiment had been tapped to go back to England as well, mostly thanks to their stellar combat record, thus far (not that it amounted to much). Normally, however, that would be reason enough to make them stay, as good units were always great things to have in defensive fortifications. Major Miles, however, had intimated that a possible reason for their redeployment was to get them to participate in an invasion of northern Spain. Harry had scoffed at the idea, stating that the Spanish Navy would never allow such a thing to happen.

And then the Battle of Biscay happened five days ago.

The Royal Navy, in quite possibly what would otherwise have been considered to be an incredibly idiotic plan, had essentially spearheaded its force directly into the path of the bulk of the Spanish Navy. Once engaged, however, the Royal Navy seemingly decided to cut its losses and retreated, drawing the encouraged Spanish Navy deeper into the Bay of Biscay—just in time for one of the Bay's most infamous storms: the Klaus storm.

Despite not being a hurricane in and of itself, the storm succeeded in throwing about hurricane-level winds at the two fleets. What the Spanish never expected, however, was that the British had been banking on a windstorm in the Bay, and had been purposefully training since the beginning of the siege of Gibraltar in choppy waters to acclimate the sailors to the conditions they would likely face. The Spanish, however, had never considered that the British would plan to fight in a way most navies around the world would have called "fucking retarded," and were thus caught off guard when the 193 km/h winds hit their fleet.

The subsequent confusion allowed the much more trained and organized British fleet to pick off the scattered Spaniards one by one, until the bulk of the Spanish Navy protecting the northern coastline was either routed, damaged, captured, or sunk.

So impossibly amazing was this victory, and the opportunity it provided, that upon making landfall in England, the 75th Regiment was immediately reassigned to the amphibious invasion force of 450,000 men, or three field armies. From the briefing, he knew that about 60,000 more troops were to be dropped from the air behind the enemy defences, ready to help link up the three major landing sites.

The 75th Regiment had been assigned to the Second Army, the one going straight down the middle of the Spanish coastline near San Vicente de la Barquera. Unlike the other Armies, the Second would be the only one whose landing site would technically be divided into two, and most certainly the only one whose immediate goals included storming a nearby populated area for control of a vital bridge, without which it would be impossible to link up with the First Army at Gijón, and the Third Army at A Coruña. Of course, the trade-off for not being the Army to take on Gijón was that they would not have to storm a major city from the front.

The faint sound of an alarm reached Harry's ears then, muffled slightly by the crashing sound of waves and the still heavy winds left behind by the Klaus storm. Harry knew the alarm well, having been treated to continuous renditions of it during the briefing so that he would be able to discern it in his sleep.

Invasion imminent.

Major Miles seemed to have realized the importance of the sound as well and put out his cigar on the railing, a grimace on his face. No soldier enjoyed the idea of an amphibious attack, mostly because it was so damn obvious; and since it was obvious, it meant the defenders had a leg up on getting ready while the attackers loaded the landing crafts and sped ashore.

"Day of days, eh?" he heard the Major mutter.

Harry smirked. "Hour of hours," he agreed.

Both of them stared at the increasingly apparent horizon with an unspoken sense of foreboding for a moment.

Harry sighed, pushing himself off the railing and turning to follow his superior. "Well, here we go."

Off "Ripon Beach"; Rupuente, Spain, January 27th, 2009 (D-Day)…

Harry was impassive as he and the men of his company were lowered down to the inner dockyard of the HMS Swift, one of the twenty Wasp-class Amphibious Assault Ships that the UK had bought from the United States in the 1990s. It was almost daunting to think that he was on the verge of becoming part of quite possibly the single most massive amphibious infantry invasions of human military history. Even the Normandy landings had not involved as many troops.

Even with twenty AAS-type ship, however, there were not enough to carry the three invasion forces by themselves. As such, it was necessary for the split forces to spearhead the landings with considerably smaller forces, and the rest would then have to follow after being transferred onto the HMS Swift and its brethren.

Unfortunately—or fortunately—the 75th Regiment had been tapped to be one of those who would spearhead the landing of the Second Army, and Harry's Charlie Company in particular had been handpicked to be the third Company to hit the beach. Why? He had no idea.

Or, at least, he had no idea until he got summoned to a secret briefing by General Cameron, the commanding officer of the Second Army. Apparently, he had been briefed by the upper echelons of the

military brass about his magical abilities, and they had decided to give him a field run—and what better time to do this than when assaulting heavy positions?

Harry was uncomfortable with the mission, if he was completely honest with himself. Certainly, he understood that he had offered the brass the opportunity to use him as a human weapon back at Sandhurst, but he had also imagined that fear of the Ministry of Magic getting wise of their use of mages in the open would have restrained them.

Then again, that would explain why they had waited this long. Well, that, and the fact that in war, fiery explosions would be common enough to pass off his abilities as mere artillery fire. More so when a massive invasion was underway.

Of course, the trade-off was that now the men of his Regiment knew what he was, considering how impossible it would be to keep it a secret from all of them once he unleashed his magic on the enemy. It was fortunate, then, that he had trained with most of them from his time as Second Lieutenant, and so most, if not all of them, trusted him as one of their own, no matter what special powers he had. Perhaps the same attitude would not be as widespread in the other regiments, but at least he now knew that the Liverpudlians would have his back. It also helped that the briefing had insisted his name was Francis White, thereby preventing the Ministry of Magic from immediately finding him should his presence in the military leak out.

"Word has it that about 25,000 men were just transferred to the First Army," Miles told him as they awaited the end of their descent into the bowels of the ship. "Field Marshal's orders," he added unnecessarily.

Harry nodded impassively. "He's drawing attention off of our group," he interpreted. "By making the assault on Gijón look like the most vital attack, he ensures that the Spanish will rush to protect it, thereby leaving the central coastline open for us."

He felt Miles' eyes on him for a moment before the feeling disappeared. "Scary mind you've got there, White."

Harry shrugged. "Strategically speaking, it even makes sense to protect Gijón over San Vicente. Gijón is smack in the centre of our

overall deployment zone, and a port city, while San Vicente is, at best, a small city—at worst, a large town," he analyzed. "Of course, that's if you approach this whole situation at face value."

Miles nodded beside him. "Right. Who could have thought that rather than consolidating our forces at Gijón and driving south to Gibraltar…"

"…our real target was much more appetizing than that?" concluded Harry with a somewhat sinister smile, enlarging it as the elevator finally stopped. "Right, sir?" he asked Miles.

Miles emulated his subordinate's confident smile. "That's right," he confirmed softly. "Besiege a city to save a city. What a crazy idea."

"Effective, though," Harry pointed out. "After all…which do you think the Spanish value more: Gibraltar…or Santander?"

Off "Ripon Beach"; Rupuente, Spain, January 27th, 2009…

Harry was glad he had never been struck with seasickness. At this moment, it would have undoubtedly been one of the most debilitating weaknesses a person could have.

Thus, instead of looking sick and feeling weakened, Harry quietly enjoyed the feeling of the boat jumping from wave crest to wave crest as it zoomed ever closer to the beach, where the Spanish guns had already opened up on the incoming transports. A lot of the men in the company had begun looking at him oddly, as if expecting him to put a stop to the guns immediately. While it was true that this was his job, he also knew that distance played an important factor in magic. A single-shot spell cast over a long distance would inevitably lose its potency as it travels, due to the concentrated magical energy loosening up due to air friction. Similarly, an enduring-shot spell that requires constant control would require more magic and focus over longer distances. At the distance they were now, neither type of spell would do much damage, were Harry to cast them.

Furthermore, he knew that he could not rely on single-shot spells to take out the entire coastal defences, as that would take an inordinate amount of time. Thus, he had to cast his most powerful fire spell in his arsenal—one that he knew he needed to be closer than he was to adequately manage. If he lost control for even a

second, it could potentially spell the deaths of quite a few of his allies. That wasn't something he was about to risk.

He perked up as he heard the footsteps of someone coming closer to him at the forefront of the deck, just behind the landing ramp.

"Pilot says we're about a minute away from landfall," he heard Miles tell him.

Harry nodded, his crossed arms stiffening a little as he tensed up for the waited moment. "Tell the lads not to rush up, sir," he advised. "What I'm about to do…it's going to be lethal."

Miles nodded. "You do what you have to, White," he replied sombrely. "You're saving the lives of our men—can't fault you for that, even if you've got freaky powers."

Harry nodded, the Major's words steeling his resolve even further. Every Spanish death at the hands of his magic would ensure one more Briton got to go home and see their loved ones again. It was not his job to worry about the enemy; it was his job to worry about his own men.

Several, succeeding snaps of his fingers caused slight sparks to appear as his anticipation grew, the small, insignificant fiery explosions lightly hitting his Number 8 uniform without effect, his magic having taken very little form with the snaps.

Even so, it got Miles staring at the display with some awe and concern. Harry did not blame him—most average folk never even got to see that much magic, as far as he understood.

"That's…not going to set you on fire, is it?" asked Miles warily. "Or, y'know, blow us up?"

Harry chuckled. "No, sir, it won't. You and the lads will be perfectly safe from me," he assured the older man with a smile. "It's the Spaniards that have to worry."

"THIRTY SECONDS!"

Harry could hear the men behind him go over their weapons one last time, the tell tale clicking noises suggesting many had released and

then reinserted their magazines into their assault rifles after a hasty inspection. For his part, Harry unfolded his arms from his chest and slid his feet such that he was presenting only his right side was presented as a target to the Spanish hidden behind the LCU's boarding ramp. Only a hint of concern ran through him as the shell-fire from the beach fortifications grew scarily closer with each miss. The LCU had been sent rocking several times from a missed shell.

Harry's secure footing kept him from stumbling forward or backwards as the LCU finally hit the beach at full speed, the sudden stop causing many of the soldiers at his back to stumble forward. Almost immediately, the sound of fully automatic machine guns opening fire ripped into his hearing, the metallic pings of ricochets adding to the cacophony of explosions and screams as the occasional soldier was hit directly or indirectly.

"CONTACT!" screamed the LCU operator, a note of hysteria in his voice as several bullets threatened to tear through the bullet-proof glass. "GO!"

Harry was ready.

The moment the ramp started to lower in front of him, his eyes widened as he took in the intended targets before him and then narrowed in concentration until it looked like he was giving the enemy an angry glare. As he breathed in a deep breath, the machine gun nests apparently only beginning to redirect their fire at his LCU, Harry felt time slow down as he willed his elevated hand to curl and his fingers to snap.

For a moment, everything seemed to stop as he whispered the incantation.

"Incendium Malus,"

Snap.

The moment Harry's fingers snapped, a spark, like every other time, erupted just off his index finger. The difference between then and now, however, was that the spark didn't just stop at this stage, but instead shot forward like a red-orange lightning bolt, headed straight for the bunker directly in Harry's line of sight, right atop the hill of

fortifications. Naturally, that made it enemy number one for Harry, and so it was to be the first victim of Britain's new field weapon.

The reddish lightning bolt suddenly began to expand a few meters away from Harry, just as time seemed to speed back up to normal. It grew wider, until it was a foot wide in diameter, and then proceeded to lose its cohesion as tongues of flame shot out from the cylindrical shape of the fire, each one in turn giving birth to millions of smaller tongues, each increasing in length and width as they began to shoot every which way away from the invasion force, like millions of angry, fiery snakes.

When the flames hit the ground, the impact was as though an anvil had been dropped onto the sand, and when the flames shot back up, only a thin sheet of glass was left behind—a testament to the sheer power of each of the serpentine flames.

"Jesus Christ…" Harry heard a man breathe behind him.

Ignoring the exclamation, Harry instead narrowed his eyes imperceptibly more as he concentrated on his spell, causing the wild tongues of flame to come together just thirty meters away from the bunker, which had, along with its nearby defenders, stopped firing on the invasion force out of shock of what was going on. The serpentine tongues coalesced into a single massive fiery entity before everyone's eyes, rising up and coiling as though it truly were a snake. Slowly, features became apparent on the large fiery coil, as a head seemed to form, followed by hollowed out cavities that everyone who could see imagined were the eyes of the hellish creature. Then, to every defender's horror, the serpent-like figure of fire opened its jaws, and fangs, still made out of fire, became apparent as it seemed ready to strike at its prey.

This was enough to shock the defenders out of their incredulous stupor as they redirected all of their fire towards the fiery serpent. Artillery shells and common bullets alike struck the fire serpent without any sort of visible success. Those bullets or shells that made it close enough to penetrate the fire serpent's body without melting in the process did so on contact, and it did not seem as though the creature was hurting any from the impact.

Then, seemingly peeved at the pitiful attacks towards its person, the snake struck its designated bunker. Almost instantly, the entire

structure appeared to ignite—even the concrete itself seemed on fire as the serpent engulfed the structure in flames. Harry could hear no screams from within, but wasn't surprised. The extraordinary heat would have consumed the air within seconds of the fire engulfing the bunker. Well, that and he was too far away to begin with.

The effects of his flame, however, were immediate. Already, he could see numerous Spanish soldiers jump out of their gun nests and rushing back over the hill in desperate retreat, the sudden loss of one of their fortified bunkers to the strange fire enough to cripple their morale. Had it been artillery, or even an infantry assault, they would have probably held the line, but this strange occurrence had been completely otherworldly, and so Harry could not blame them for their fear.

However, his job was not done. Glancing to the south, where the rest of the 2nd Army would be disembarking soon, he saw that some of the more stalwart defenders had resumed their attacks on his compatriots. Thus, with a twitch of his extended right index finger, the fiery serpent ceased its fiery feast of the bunker and raised its head to look at its new targets.

This time, Harry did hear the screams.

Short bursts of yelling would precede the immediate vaporizing of hundreds, if not thousands of men as the serpent lashed out across the entire hill, its head or body consuming all nearby objects as it moved with undaunted tenacity towards its next meal. His superiors would undoubtedly ask for bodies for examination, but Harry knew that was impossible to ask of the fiery serpent. All it touched turned to ash. By the end of the battle, there would be no life on this hill, and the ashes of its defenders would mix with the ashes of nature.

Soon, the serpent coiled before Harry, staring down at him impassively, three stories up, as though either deciding whether or not to feast on its creator as well or follow its commands. Harry knew it was neither—the creature had no intelligence of its own. It was a mere construct of his will—an extension of his power. It would dissipate whenever he ordered it to, and there was nothing it could do to stop him.

"Good work," he praised it nonetheless, staring at it dully as it bobbed its head once before slowly dissipating as he cut the

magical link that fed its existence. By the time the wind had scattered the fiery beast, Harry was practically on his knees from the exhaustion the spell had inflicted on him. Sure, he had the power to vaporize the Crown's enemies, but he had his limits as well, and it seemed he was nearly reaching it. That would fix itself, however—lack of continuous, open use had ensured that his magical reserves were not all that impressive, but now that he was probably going to be allowed to use his fire magic at the fore of the 2nd Army, he would have sufficient practice to increase his reserves.

Harry turned his gaze back onto the fortifications, or what were left of them. As far to the south as he could see, there were still fires burning the last of the grass and bodies away. To the north, the same sight reached his eyes, a testament to the destructive power of his spell. Harry winced slightly as he felt his right wrist ache from the amount of magic he had channelled, and quickly proceeded to rub it. It was one of the drawbacks of not having a wand, he supposed. Having no such conduit meant that he was forced to convert his entire body into a wand, which meant that the taxation that the wand would typically go through was instead forcing itself on his body. Again, with practice, he was sure he would be able to make the aches go away.

With the screams gone and the guns silenced, however, the silence was practically deafening as everyone in the 2nd Army landing force stared wide-eyed at the destruction before them. Patches of sand were turned to coated glass, and the whole of the hillside seemed to have turned a mixture of grey and black—ash and carbon. It was, in a word, horrendous to look at.

"Christ, White…" he heard Miles speak from beside him. "Remind me never to piss you off…"

Harry chuckled. "I fear I am not powerful enough to do this sort of thing more than once a day at this moment, sir," he assured his superior. "Fiendfyre is an extremely difficult spell to master, and taxing as hell."

Harry imagined that Miles nodded at his explanation, before seeing him move past him and down the ramp. About to set foot on the beach, he suddenly stopped and looked back at Harry anxiously.

"It…is safe to move on the beach and hill, right?" he asked warily. Hell, for all he knew, the very sand could be superheated—nevermind the carbon-black hill.

Harry smiled reassuringly and nodded. "It should be fine. If you want, I can clear a path using water magic, just to be sure," he offered. He almost laughed as he watched Miles quickly shake his head.

"NO!" the man all but squeaked. "No, no…thanks, but…I think we've all taken in as much as we can for one day," he said apologetically, glancing behind Harry at the waiting soldiers of Charlie Company.

Looking back, Harry had to prevent himself from grimacing at the sight. Most of his comrades were staring at him with obvious fear, while a few seemed quietly respectful, yet still wary. It was inevitable, he supposed. He would have to earn his men's trust from scratch.

Looking back towards his handiwork, Harry sighed.

Well, at least the first field test had been successful.

Comillas, Spain, January 30th, 2009 (D-Day +3)…

"INCOMING!"

Harry all but threw himself into the residential building at his side, just as a mortar shell exploded in the street he had been occupying seconds earlier.

"FUCK!" he yelled, still a little shaken by the near-death experience.

The assault towards Santander had quickly run into problems. Where the British had thought the Spaniards would never imagine such a roundabout strategy to conquer a port city, the local garrison forces had more than anticipated the British plan, and had moved to block the 2nd Army at Comillas, less than an hour away from their landing sites.

Apparently more courageous than their national army colleagues, the local forces had not deserted their posts upon seeing Harry's fire magic, instead redoubling their efforts as they defended the homes they'd been living in all their lives. It was a sentiment Harry could empathize with, but not one he wished they had. A determined

enemy, even in numerically inferior groups, could still inflict quite a bit of damage on a larger force. At the very least, if they got bogged down here at Comillas, then there was a chance that Santander would send reinforcements and possibly precipitate a battle that the British High Command knew they could not win. Hell, most of the planning behind the conquest of Santander relied on the element of surprise, coupled with momentum and speed. So far, they had successfully surrounded Comillas, thereby cutting off communications with the outside, and had captured or destroyed any vehicles that came their way.

The problem was, however, that the town would not give up, no matter what the British tried. Even with about 75% of the town in British hands, the defenders held staunchly to their positions, and they were incurring much more casualties than the brass liked. While Harry dearly hoped that would not be the case, he knew that if the 2nd Army didn't resume their progress towards Santander soon, he would be ordered to vaporize the town.

Looking up from his position on the hardwood floors, he was surprised to see a small family huddled in the corner, obviously terrified of him. Harry blinked in confusion—he had thought the townsfolk had been evacuated long ago to the castle overlooking the town. Yet, here they were.

He tried to smile at them reassuringly, but was disheartened when the wife and daughter seemed to curl deeper into the husband's protective embrace, while the man shouted at him in Spanish—no doubt telling him to get out and leave them alone.

It wasn't odd to Harry anymore. At first, granted, it was a little crushing to see such fear on the faces of people, but the fighting at San Vicente had shown him countless such faces that he now didn't care as much. Nor did he blame them, really—what must he have looked like to them, covered in blood that wasn't his, grime, and ash? Had they seen him on the beach at Rupuente, they would have undoubtedly been even more scared than they were now. The man probably wouldn't be shouting, but rather crying like his wife and daughter.

His eyes flittered around, taking in the sight of the house. Judging from the furniture, he was in the living room, which also seemed to double as the dining room. Hanging prominently next to the table

was a large blue flag with the fascist yoke and arrows symbol of the Spanish Phalanx—the enemy of Britain. His mind raced. Had they been taken in by the propaganda, or were they true believers? What had caused them to support such evil men and women, who would happily plunge their country into war?

The patriarch of the family seemed to notice his observation of the fascist flag and his chest swelled with pride, answering Harry's curiosity. The man was a true supporter. He would not be dissuaded from the fascist cause. Hell, the only reason he seemed to be with his family instead of the militia the 75th Regiment was fighting all over town was that nasty scar Harry spotted on the man's left ankle—the skin of which had been briefly shown when the man shifted his legs.

Harry grimaced openly now as he got to his feet. Barely a few seconds had gone by since he had jumped into this house for safety, and already he was feeling like he'd just jumped into another type of battlefield. What was it with fanatics? What made them tick? Why were they throwing their lives away against a numerically and technologically superior foe?

Harry looked at the cowering family once more and raised a hand to motion them to stay put. "Stay here," he told them slowly, hoping they would understand. You never knew with country locals.

Either way, the man seemed to get the message, but snarled back in response. Clearly he had a problem with Harry's very existence, and Harry was all too willing to get the hell out of the house before he got knifed in the back by the crippled man.

Moving slowly to the front door—whose actual door had been blasted out of existence—Harry put himself against the doorframe and peeked out to see whether the coast was clear. He smiled as he saw a few of Charlie Company rush by, seemingly missing his presence as they rushed to deal with the remaining militia. That could only spell good news—perhaps the mortar nest had finally been taken care of.

Glancing back at the family, he watched them silently for a few seconds before nodding at them and then rushing back out, assault rifle levelled and ready to continue the fight.

By the sound of the persistent gunfire in the air, there was still a lot of killing to do.

Santander, Spain, February 4th, 2009 (D-Day +7)…

Harry fell flat on his stomach as an explosion tore apart the façade of the building he was taking cover in, along with elements of Charlie Company.

"Again with the fucking explosions!" he yelled angrily as the dust settled from the mortar shell's destructive blast. "How many fucking mortars do they have?"

A cough near him told him of other survivors from the blast, much to his relief.

"Status report!" he yelled, trying to clear out the ringing from his own ear all the while.

"Shit! Mendel is down!" he heard one of the privates shouted, a note of hysteria in his voice.

"MEDIC!" he heard another roar.

"Settle down!" he ordered loudly. "Status report, now!" he repeated.

There were numerous mutterings throughout the small group before someone spoke up to answer his demand. "Five down, seventeen still good to go, sir!"

Harry cursed. That shell had taken quite a bit of his current forces—not that they were technically assigned to him. Assaulting the city had pretty much forced the 75th Regiment to scatter as the initial assault stalled upon hitting the city defences. Even though the 2nd Army had been headed by a column of Challenger 2 Main Battle Tanks, the routes into the city had been barricaded against armour, causing the column to have to move away from the infantry and try to find another way in via the township of San Román to the north. Thus stripped of armour support, and in dire need to keep advancing so that Santander would fall as quickly as possible, the 15,000-man 5th Division kept its steady march towards Santander, hoping that the armoured column would be able to link up further into the city.

Not even ten blocks in, however, and the infantry had been forced to scatter into a thin line as they were almost immediately beset by Spanish regulars, coupled with some of the more patriotic civilians. Considering that the defenders had the advantage of terrain, it made for a pretty damn screwed up situation.

Harry cursed as he got to one side of the newly made hole in the wall and peered out, pulling back his head just as a sniper bullet missed his left eye by millimetres.

"SHIT!" he cursed, stumbling back. "Fucking sniper!"

He noticed the rest of his men form up either behind him or on the other side of the hole, all of them taking great care not to show any part of their bodies now that the sniper had been identified.

"Where?" asked a private behind him.

Harry peered out again and just as quickly pulled back, somehow evading the sniper's vigilant sights.

"Beige building, fourth floor, second apartment from the left," he noted. "Anyone know if Miller is on sniping duty?" he then asked.

Head shakes greeted him, much to his frustration. "Damnit!" he cursed, his mind quickly thinking through different approaches to the problem. The most plausible one he came up with did not please him. "Okay, new plan then."

He pointed at the man opposite him on the other side of the hole. "Jackson, take Porter and Macmillan and storm the building to the left on the other side of the street. Harrison," he addressed the man behind him. "You take Blithe, Mansfield, Stone, and Cummings and get the building on the right. Rest of you, covering fire, on my mark!"

There were silent nods at his command, all of them ready to move on his order. "Who'll take down the sniper, sir?" asked Harrison.

"I've got him," Harry assured him. "Your job is to take his eyes off of me while I get ready."

Harrison nodded seriously. "Aye, sir."

Confident that his men understood their roles, Harry shifted his stance a bit to get ready and dropped his assault rifle, so that it hung at his side by its sling. Raising a hand, he spread his fingers and made sure that the men both to his front and looked at the designated leads, who nodded back at him to denote their readiness.

He pumped his arm once and then curled one finger. Four remained.

The soldiers' grips on their weapons tightened. Another digit went down. Three remained. The sound of gunfire elsewhere in the city intensified as the fighting continued to ravage the city. Two digits remain. The sound of a mortar blast up the street pierces their ears—one of the privates flinches instinctively but quickly regains his focus. One digit remains. The hands of every soldier have turned nearly ghostly white from the strength of their grip. They take a deep breath.

Harry lowers his index finger. No digits remain.

With a sudden cry designed to grab attention, the two groups suddenly sprint out of the building towards their targets, confusing the sniper momentarily as he becomes undecided which group to target first. One has more troops and thus are less liable to be impeded by a single kill, but they were headed towards a location he would have a hard time surveying, while the others were smaller in number, but headed directly into his blind spot.

By the time he made his decision, however, it was already too late.

The remaining soldiers by Harry's side came into view then, firing their assault rifles directly at where the sniper was purported to be, causing the lone Spaniard to have to duck his head to avoid getting it blasted off. They weren't the real danger, however, and if the sniper had been part of the defenders at Rupuente, he would have known this.

From behind the sudden wall of soldiers massed at the hole in the wall came out Harry, his uniform making him undistinguishable from his comrades, except for the three pips on his shoulder lapels. For a moment, the sniper wondered why the man seemingly abandoned the protective wall his comrades made, and why he was raising his hand in his direction, as though prepared to snap his fingers.

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them once more, a completely uncaring look in his eyes as he condemned yet another person to a fiery death.

"Ardere."

Snap.

Harry watched impassively as the reddish spark turned into a bolt like before, except this time it raced all the way to the apartment where the sniper was hiding, and there exploded with such intensity that the entire floor was vaporized. Fortunately, no other floors had existed on top of that one, so no additional collateral damage was done.

The soldiers around him and at the two buildings to his front paused long enough to cheer before he raised a hand to stop them.

"Celebrate later," he ordered impassively. "That's bound to have attracted their attention. We're relocating to Objective Alpha. Mansfield, you take point. Move out."

There was a chorus of acknowledgements, and then only the sound of boots hitting ground, followed by the silence of death.

Santander, Spain, February 8th, 2009 (D-Day +12)…

Harry didn't know what to feel at the moment.

On the one hand, he felt a bit of awe as he stood within the richly decorated Palacio de la Magdalena—one of the prominent sites of Santander, and the current HQ of the 2nd Army's Eastern Offensive. It was, as the whole city now was, a symbol of British victory.

Nevermind that half the city was also on fire.

If the brass had wanted Santander intact, they would be sorely disappointed. Between the artillery barrages, the tank column blasting its way through the north, and Harry's own devastating fire magic, most of the city was in ruins. Only the port had been spared from the devastation, and that was mostly because there were specific orders to prevent that from happening. Harry's own kill count had risen considerably in this one siege.

Which, considering the fact that it only took about 5 days, was not bad at all—it had nonetheless already claimed too many people for his liking, both on his side and on the enemy's.

On the other hand, Harry felt a lot of anxiety and depression rushing through him. In the very last day of fighting, Major Miles had been shot by an undiscovered Spanish sniper practically in the middle of Charlie Company. The resulting rage that had coursed through Harry had levelled a whole city block once he'd snapped his fingers, burying the unseen murderer beneath metric tons of concrete and steel.

This, of course, meant that there was now an opening in the Regiment's hierarchy, and while he wasn't technically the most senior of the Captains, he had been told by his Company lieutenants that he was by far the most distinguished. This meant that he felt the apprehension of a potential promotion, coupled with the anxiety of having to fill Major Miles' considerable shoes.

Added to these feelings, however, was a desire to take the promotion, and more. He wanted Charlie Company behind him the way it had stood behind Miles. He wanted to one day replace Colonel Strider as leader of the 75th Regiment, and in so doing have his voice heard by the generals leading the campaign, so that less of his men would have to die pointless deaths.

This entire assault on Santander had been clumsily handled from the very beginning, he felt. Rather than try to bum-rush the city, the Division should have taken its time the moment it found the roadblocks. With the Challenger tanks providing close support through the whole ordeal, it would have then become easier to maintain unit cohesion, rather than have nearly fifteen thousand men spread out throughout the entire city, trying to desperately maintain some sort of communication with the rest of the Division.

He wasn't the only one feeling disgruntled, either. He had been informed that numerous other junior officers and some field officers also felt that the attack could have gone better. The degree to which they blamed Major General Johnson varied, of course. Some placed all the blame on him, while others conceded that there were numerous other factors in play. Regardless of the degree, however,

it was clear that everyone held some measure of ill feelings for Major General Johnson.

But to Harry, all of those feelings had to be suppressed now, as he stood before the door leading to Colonel Strider's office. With Miles and Lieutenant Colonel Avery dead, and the other two Lieutenant Colonels laid out in a hospital, Strider was his immediate superior, and he had ordered him to show up at his office.

Knocking gently at the door, he waited until he heard the invitation to come inside before opening the door. Inside, he was surprised to see Lieutenant Colonel Williams sitting to one side of Colonel Strider's desk, his left arm in a sling and a bloody bandage around his head. Colonel Strider, as expected, was sitting at his desk, the grim-faced man staring holes into Harry as he came inside and closed the door before going rigid at attention and saluting.

"At ease, Captain," Strider said impassively before motioning for Harry to take a seat.

Once seated, Strider spoke up again. "Before we begin," he started. "Please give me your company status report, Captain."

Harry nodded firmly. "We have sustained moderate casualties, sir. Out of a total of two-hundred men at the start of the invasion, we lost none at Rupuente, fifteen died at Comillas and five had to be evacuated to a hospital due to injuries; ten more died at Torrelavega, three were injured but did not need hospital treatment; two were injured at Santa Cruz de Bezana, and thirteen died here in Santander, with ten wounded, three of them critical," he recited dutifully. "Sir, that gives Charlie Company a total of thirty-eight dead and eight critical wounded."

By the time he was done, he could see that Colonel Strider was looking even more grim-faced. He imagined that, as the third Captain of the 75th being called in, the poor man had to have gotten bad news all day so far. He felt bad for the man, but realized this was probably not going to change throughout the war.

"Damn, we're getting hammered, Isaac," Lieutenant-Colonel Williams breathed. "That's, what? Already about a hundred fifty dead across the Regiment?" he asked. "And we're not even done getting all the reports in!"

Colonel Strider nodded his head wearily, putting his face in his hands as though his head was too much of a burden to lift up at this point. Harry felt bad for the man, he did, but at the same time knew that this was not likely to change throughout the war.

"Johnson's going to get us all killed," he heard the Colonel mutter, unsure if that was meant to be heard, or if the Colonel had just spoken a little louder than he thought he'd had. "Anyway, down to business. Jeremy, if you would?"

Lt. Colonel Williams nodded and made to stand up, eliciting a similar response from Harry until Strider waved him down, before using his good hand to rifle in his pocket and take out two small, black cases. He promptly tossed them over to Harry, who instinctively caught them.

"Congratulations, Major White," Strider congratulated him. "You are now officially CO of Charlie Company, though due to current…lack of manpower, we are further giving you temporary command of First Battalion, while Lieutenant-Colonel Sink recovers from his wounds. We expect great things of you."

Harry saluted the Colonel stiffly, a proud look in his eyes. "Thank you, sir!" he replied earnestly. While it was not the way he'd wished he'd get promoted—over the bloodied corpse of his predecessor—it nonetheless did fulfil one of his immediate, short-term goals.

Strider saluted back, as did Lt. Colonel Williams, before then motioning to the second black case. "Open it, Major," he suggested.

When Harry did so, he found himself confused. The insignia inside it was not one he was familiar with—a wand and rifle crossed over a crown. "Sir?" he asked confusedly.

Strider glanced over at Williams, meeting each other's eyes, and then back at Harry. "White, in light of your numerous successful uses of offensive magic on the battlefield, High Command has decided to tack onto you a new title—one any future mages in the Armed Forces would also use once vetted and trained," he explained.

"Military Mage," Williams stated simply.

Strider nodded. "Quite so. That will be your new title, to be affixed before any rank you have at the time," he explained further. "Thus, as of now, you are to be known as Military Mage Major Francis White whenever you use official documentation or give official verbal reports."

Williams grinned. "Be thankful. The first thing they came up with was Military-Sanctioned War Mage. Bit of a mouthful, isn't it?" he asked jocularly.

Harry nodded, a little uncertain about this move. "Sirs? Respectfully, may I ask a question?"

Strider nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"Thank you, sir. Does this mean that my status as a mage will become public knowledge?" he asked warily.

To Harry's enormous relief, Strider shook his head in the negative. "Absolutely not, Major," he stated gruffly. "As before, your status as a mage is to be confined to the brass and the 2nd Army. In the event that your skills are required elsewhere, measures will be taken to prevent your secret from getting out."

Harry nodded, his body language noticeably far less tense now. "Thank you, sirs," he said with a smile.

Strider nodded right back. "You're welcome Major. Now then, a final piece of business. Due to your now official status as a Military Mage, you are being given a codename for field transmissions," he told Harry. "This is to allow the Army to speak to you without revealing your identity as a Military Mage to the enemy."

Harry nodded. "I understand, sir. What is to be my codename?"

Strider pulled out an envelope from his desk drawer and handed it over, undoubtedly full of the official documentation of everything that had been spoken of during this meeting. "Hellfire."

Burgos, Spain, April 15th, 2009 (D-Day +68)…

Charlie Company had not fared well for the past month.

While its success rate was practically unmatched, the casualties it was receiving were, in a word, debilitating. Even with replacements pouring in from Britain, there was no stopping the fact that the Battalion was losing almost as many people as it was receiving per battle—usually because the 75th Regiment was always being called to fight in the most dangerous locations as a direct result of their incredible success rate.

Furthermore, being the temporary Battalion CO, Harry was the one feeling the burden the most, considering that he had resorted to using his Fire magic to save as many of his men's lives as he could—and still that wasn't good enough. He literally could not be everywhere, and as a result, men died as the brass, despite Colonel Strider's objections, decided to fling the 75th Regiment at every major target without realizing the damage they were doing.

Morale was at an all time low in the Battalion, despite Harry's best efforts. It wasn't that the soldiers would not listen to him, but they were quickly becoming jaded, unwilling to believe that they would make it out of the war—which in turn fed some unhealthy, borderline suicidal habits. Some soldiers had taken to walking on the battlefield, for instance, rather than running. Their sense of self-preservations had been shot to hell, and now the Company was seeing the results in the rising death toll. Out of the original 200 soldiers of Charlie Company, for example, only about 75 remained, with the rest being made up of replacements. Harry had even heard of some Rupuente veterans who, after getting flung at every major combat zone thereafter, had shot themselves from the mental exhaustion.

This newest mission of their was no better, either. The 75th Regiment had been, yet again, called upon to be the vanguard of the 2nd Army's strike south. While the 1st Army would take Valladolid, and the 3rd Army struck at Ponferrada and Vigo, the 2nd Army was to pacify the north-eastern sector, which, to an extent, they had successfully accomplished. However, they had one more major target to get rid of: Burgos.

A major regional centre, it stood between the 2nd Army and Madrid, and successful capture of the city would mean that the southern Spanish forces would have to redirect their efforts to protecting Madrid, rather than fighting equally on all fronts. Already, the invasion up north had gotten the Spaniards to back off of Gibraltar,

and a 4th Army had been deployed there by sea to open up a second front. From the scant few reports Harry had gotten his hands on, the 4th Army had just managed to secure Cadiz, and were working on Malaga.

Still, being a regional centre, it meant that Burgos was proportionately defended. The Spanish Eastern Army, they found out, was defending the city, and considering the trouble that the 2nd Army had in fighting them across north-eastern Spain, they were not an opponent to sneeze at.

In fact, they were one of the most difficult opponents the British had yet to meet. When Harry led his Company into battle that day, they barely dented the city defences. The Eastern Army had taken careful precautions to avoid the repeat defeats from the north-east and had dug themselves in quite efficiently, such that even an artillery barrage made minimal impact on the enemy's combat efficiency.

Even worse was the fact that there were reports of reinforcements from Madrid moving up the highway to come to the aid of the Eastern Army. So far, satellite images had counted a full Corps moving up, meaning that the 2nd Army would be in dire straights if the Eastern Army and the reinforcements managed to link up. Fortunately Major General Johnson had managed to realize the danger the reinforcements posed, and had as such sent elements of the 2nd Army to capture Villalmanzo and blockade the highway there. The rest of the army, meanwhile, would surround Burgos and lay siege to the well-entrenched defenders.

Observing the city from his place in a comfortable apartment on the outskirts of the city where part of his Company had dug in, Harry watched as central Burgos burned under the mass barrage of the 2nd Army's support artillery. Knowing that his men were relaxing behind him, fully enjoying the comforts of the well-furnished apartment, Harry walked over to a particularly enticing loveseat and settled in for the wait.

Burgos, Spain, May 4, 2009 (D-Day +87)…

The worst part of a promotion, Harry felt, was the paperwork. Since becoming Major and temporary head of First Battalion, Harry had been essentially pulled from the front lines and been forced to either

stay at the back, or sit in some makeshift office and look at papers that more often than not were combat reports from his Captains and Majors—something that elicited quite a bit of anxiety from him, as the reports he was reading were dealing with his men's lives. As the CO pro tempore of the 1st Battalion, he had expanded his protectiveness to all 1000 of the members of his unit, and he was loathe to send them into combat after combat without so much as a breather.

Still, orders were orders, and he was hardly in a place to tell Major General Johnson to go fuck himself.

"Sir? Colonel Strider wants an update on the status of the rear lines," his assistant—probably one of the only perks of his new job—informed him as he walked into the tent.

Harry, of course, was ready for this, as he continuously compiled the incoming reports into a single, large status report for the Colonel whenever they came in. "First stack on the left edge of the table," he told his assistant monotonously as he kept reading and signing documents.

The assistant paused for a moment. "Your left or mine, sir?"

"Yours."

The man nodded. "Thank you, sir," he stated before picking up said stack and promptly leaving the tent to deliver the status report.

Harry's period of silence, however, did not last, as he heard someone coming up to the tent flap. "Come in," he said lazily, leaning back in his chair and viewing the requisition requests his Majors were sending up.

"Sir!" he heard the acknowledgement and looked up from the requisition request form. He was unsurprised to see the Regimental S2 Officer, Albert Hughes, come in.

"Good morning, Albert," Harry greeted the man. "What have you managed to ferret out of our wonderful superiors?"

There was little sarcasm in Harry's tone. Both men in the tent knew that the more Harry knew about his superiors' intentions, the better

he could prepare his men for whatever was to come and so protect them from as much harm as he could.

Albert smiled crookedly. It fit him, in a way. He was not handsome, per se, but nor was he ugly. Average and nondescript seemed to be a more fitting way to describe the intelligence officer. He could easily fit in most European societies without ever eliciting any suspicion, and had a sharp mind to back it up. Like the rest of the staff, Hughes was originally part of Major Miles' staff, and Harry had inherited his services, as it were.

"Bad tidings, Major," the man stated simply. "Sounds like Villalmanzo may not hold. There's talk already of setting up a secondary defence post at Saldaña de Burgos," he relayed. "Guess who's getting tipped for the post?"

Harry looked at the S2 Officer impassively. "I guess Colonel Strider failed to get the 75th out of the brass' eye, then," he deduced.

Albert nodded. "General Johnson was adamant that such an 'elite' Regiment—his words, not mine—should be given the task," he informed his temporary superior before shrugging. "My bet is that he hopes you'll take care of the enemy Corps with your freaky magic."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I'm flattered the General has such a high opinion of me," he stated sardonically. "A Corps is too much for my reserves. Especially in an open field where they can spread out as they wish," he then explained. "But nevermind about that—what can you tell me about this new post of ours?"

"I never said the 75th was definitely going," Albert pointed out, which Harry waved away dismissively.

"We both know it's a matter of time before Johnson gives the go-ahead," he refuted. "So tell me what I need to know to keep my men alive."

Albert smiled crookedly again. "Well, the first thing you should know is that Saldaña de Burgos is a tiny, residential-intensive town."

Harry gave a grimace of distaste. "Perfect. More Ultranationalist fanatics," he muttered.

Albert shrugged. "Hazard of invading a fanatic country, sir," he apologized insincerely. "Anyway, it's nestled right next to the highway to Burgos, which means that it's a sure thing that the enemy will be coming that way. Unfortunately, it doesn't straddle both sides, so you'll need to make some on-site defences and barricades to keep the enemy away."

"Any natural defences we can use to our advantage?"

Albert shook his head. "Sadly not, sir. Flatlands on either side pretty much ensure that if the Corps is really determined to get around you, they will."

Harry sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily. Why on earth were they pushing their own lines so far south, then? "Is there any good news?" he asked.

Albert shrugged. "Depends on what you call 'good' news," he replied flatly. "Word is, the reason the 75th is being tipped for the job also has a lot to do with our reputation among the Spanish army. Turns out, our success record is something of a standing blight on the Spanish military's honour, so word has it that the civvies in power in Madrid have a standing order for the Spanish military to seek us out and defeat us wherever they can."

Harry quickly deduced the implications of that statement. "So the brass wants us as bait," he concluded, narrowing his eyes as Albert nodded with a grimace. "Why? I can't imagine General Johnson coming up with this sort of complex scheme."

"It's not his plan. Turns out, it's General Cameron's idea," Albert relayed as he shifted himself into a more comfortable position in the chair opposite Harry's desk. "Though the details haven't been released yet to the appropriate commanders."

"Sounds like he's playing this one closely to his chest."

Albert nodded. "Indeed. I have a few theories, mind you." Harry nodded and waved him on. "Well, the way I see it, and judging from the lay of the land, Saldaña is pretty much a defensive nightmare, being that it is both small, sparse in potentially defensive structures, and the surrounding geography is an armoured Corps' wet dream."

"A death trap," Harry summed up succinctly, eliciting a smile from Albert.

"Quite so, sir," he agreed. "So why sacrifice a whole elite regiment to the Spanish? I figure that General Cameron is expecting us to fight the good fight at Saldaña, but then pull back to Pedernales, just south of Burgos."

"Why on earth for?" asked Harry, surprised. "That would bring them a stone's throw away from the siege!"

Albert smiled conspiratorially. "Tell me, sir, do you know where the Third Airborne Corps is right now?" he asked slyly.

Harry blinked as he realized that he did not, in fact, have a clue of where the Airborne troops had been deployed to since the initial invasion. Being highly mobile and capable on their own, Harry had imagined that the III Airborne Corps had been behind most of the 2nd Army's success in the North-East. It didn't take him long to realize that they were, once again, working behind the scenes in this little ambush that General Cameron had cooked up. "Where are they?" he asked interestedly, leaning forward over his desk.

Albert put up a finger to his lips, the sly smile still on. "It's technically a secret," he commented. "But word from my colleagues is that they've been deployed to three areas around here: Villagonzalo Pedernales, Pedernales itself, and, the most curious of all emplacements, Modubar de la Emparedada."

Harry stared on blankly at the place names, even going so far as to pull out a map of the region to better understand the ramifications of such positions. It didn't take him long after that to realize what General Cameron was planning. "Christ…Albert, if this works…" he breathed, eyes widening.

Albert smiled and nodded. "We'll have captured an entire Spanish Corps. Now isn't that something to write home about?"

Pedernales, Spain, May 14th, 2009 (D-Day +97)…

"Well, I can safely say that if you hadn't told me about this possibility, Albert, I'd have never believed it," Harry commented as he watched

the catastrophic defeat of the Spanish V Corps through his binoculars.

Albert smiled crookedly. "I aim to please, sir," was his simple reply.

The scene before them was equal parts ghastly and awe-inspiring. Spanish tanks, and thousands of bodies, were littering the highway leading south, all of them victims of the masterful ambush that General Cameron had set in the town of Pedernales and its surroundings.

As Albert had predicted, the 75th Regiment had been deployed to Saldaña de Burgos the day after he had confided in Harry, and predictably, just as they were digging in, they were met with the retreating elements of the 2nd Division. As the reports had been suggesting all this time, there was indeed a Spanish Corps rolling north, with a substantial armoured component. Fortunately, however, the 2nd Division's 56th and 47th Regiments had been able to bloody the enemy such that their numbers were substantially diminished by the time they would hit Saldaña.

Thus emboldened with that small bit of good news, the 75th Regiment had renewed its efforts to dig themselves in quite earnestly, making sure to make life as difficult as possible for the enemy tanks in particular. Thankfully, the fact that the 75th was both occupying a Spanish town and blocking the middle of an important highway ensured that they would not simply bombard the area into nonexistence, as that would probably be enough to incite anything less than the most ardent supporters of the government to dissent, and would similarly damage the highway itself.

The first attacks occurred two days after they had finished their works—presumably due to the Spanish V Corps having to lick its wounds from the beating the 56th and 47th Regiments had inflicted on them. Thus, when the hammer finally fell on Saldaña, it promptly got bounced back as the well-entrenched Britons gave as much as they got, and then some. Casualties were, admittedly, unavoidable, and sheer weight of numbers did get the V Corps some gradual gains. However, the 75th Regiment had counted on this, and after having drawn in sufficient numbers of them—and showing off their Regimental number—the regiment was ordered to retreat to Pedernales, with the III Corps predictably hot on their tails, hoping to

finally eradicate the source of much shame among the Spanish brass.

When the 75th thus wheeled into Pedernales, the Spanish followed suit, expecting to find the British lines still further north—within Burgos' own outlying reaches, in fact. What they did not expect, however, was for remote-detonated charges to go off just as the armoured column rolled into the town, or the sudden appearance of thousands of hidden paratroopers among the buildings at the sides of the highway, effectively cutting off the Spanish Corps into two, as the northern half was immediately set upon by the 'retreating' 75th Regiment.

Of course, once they realized they had walked into an ambush, the V Corps immediately began fighting back, until they realized that another force was rolling in from the west—more paratroopers in armoured personnel carriers. When news came of a southern flanking move, however, the V Corps began to panic, and much of what was left, already battered and broken by the ambush, either surrendered or broke and ran east, only to find themselves in the waiting arms of the 47th and 56th Regiments, who had been reassigned to serve as the eastern flank of the ambush.

The end result was staggering. An entire Spanish Corps either lied dead on the streets of Pedernales, or were now being marched off to the coast by the 75th Regiment as POWs.

Observing the march from atop one of the intact buildings left in Pedernales, Harry couldn't help but be immensely impressed at the ingenuity of the plan. General Cameron had, by manipulating Major General Johnson indirectly, effectively managed to keep the plan a secret long enough that no one had acted in such a way to tip off the Spaniards. Added to that was the incredibly sneaky deployment of the paratroopers, and one was left with an amazing plan.

The best news, however? The 75th was finally getting pulled off the front lines for some much-needed R&R in England. In their stead, two more regiments were being flown into Santander to bolster the 2nd Army, as it now stood as the closest force to Madrid of all four field armies.

Harry dropped his binoculars and smiled at the sight of his men rolling out in the troop trucks, most of them now happily chatting.

They had made it through the worst and survived. Now, it was time for some well-deserved rest.

Or, rather, that would have been the feeling most prevalent, if some shouting hadn't quickly pierced into his psyche at that moment. Now, ordinarily, shouting was about as common as weapons fire in times of war—it was probably even the most effective means of communication on a battlefield—but as the fighting had now effectively ended, and most of the troops involved were getting ready to redeploy back north to Burgos—with only a standing force of paratroopers staying behind to hold Pedernales as a forward outpost—Harry was not expecting hysterical shouts of fear or anger to occur.

Exchanging a worried look with Albert, the two men descended from the rooftop of the building and quickly made their way to an abandoned warehouse in the south-east of the town, where the ambushing paratroopers had been stationed during the wait.

What Harry found there sickened him and damn near got him in such a rage as to summon his fire magic.

A young girl—no more than fifteen by the looks of her, although the grime and blood made it difficult to tell for sure—was being manhandled by four Britons wearing the uniforms of the 47th Regiment, which made sense once one remembered that they were in charge of the eastern flank of the ambush.

"What the fuck is going on here?" demanded Harry angrily, Albert at his side pulling his service pistol from its holster and ready to back up his CO. More to the point, he was already calling for backup on his radio.

One of the four men ganging up on the girl looked back at him and Harry could easily tell the man was drunk out of his mind. "Who the fuck are you?" the man demanded drunkenly, his face set in a scowl at being interrupted.

"'Ey, it's that freak!" one of the other would-be rapists identified Harry. "Y'know, the one who torches people!"

Harry glared at the group, increasing its intensity as he saw the looks of disgust on them. It was not an expression that rapists had a right to have. "Let the girl go, and I might be convinced not to torch you," he warned dangerously.

Instantly, he saw two of them reach for their pistols. "We ain't listening to no freak!" one of the two hasty drunks shouted angrily as he reached for his gun. He never had the chance.

With two sharp bangs, both of the mutinous soldiers fell to the ground, nursing bloodied knees as Albert's pinpoint precision blasted apart their left kneecaps. Harry, meanwhile, had his right hand extended and his fingers ready to snap.

"Anyone else want to test us?" he asked furiously.

The two remaining unwounded soldiers quickly let go of the girl and raised their hands as Albert's pistol trailed their every move and Harry's fingers seemed about ready to snap at any second. The wounding of their two comrades had effectively snapped them out of their drunken stupor, and they were just realizing how much trouble they were in.

It didn't take long for the Military Police to arrive shortly after Albert wounded the two mutineers. With equal expressions of disgust, they quickly rounded up the soldiers and escorted them back to the centre of the city—with the two wounded soldiers getting taken their by medical litter. Harry, for his part, had given his official statement on the matter and had offered to take the girl back to the camp himself, seeing as she was hysterically screaming at the Military Police when they tried to near her. Only Harry and Albert seemed to be able to get close to her without eliciting some sort of hysterical response, so Harry had taken responsibility, much to the MPs' frustration.

The debrief at the camp did not take long—insofar as the girl was concerned. Colonel Strider, of course, had been out-of-his-mind furious with his colleague and had demanded the harshest possible punishment for the four would-be rapists and mutineers. When Albert had relayed said exchange back to Harry, he hadn't been able to keep a smile off his face.

The girl, for her part, had been given Harry's room to rest, while he settled for his desk chair and a footstool. Additionally, he sent a missive to the senior-most Captain in the Battalion, Captain Shepherd, to lead the battalion and the POWs back to Santander as planned while he stayed behind to take care of the legal issues of what he'd interrupted. Predictably, word spread throughout the battalion and Harry came out as even more of a hero than he'd already been thanks to his constant watch over the men. Harry suspected that Albert had a hand in playing up his role, even though it had been Albert himself who had shot two of the perpetrators.

Overall? It had been a crazy day.

Burgos, Spain, June 18th, 2009 (D-Day +132)…

There were few things in Harry's life that he could truly admit to hating.

Telling Elicia, William, and John that he wouldn't be able to visit because his leave pass was cancelled was one of them.

The cancellation, thankfully, had not been extended to his men, and he happily sent them off to the British Isles for some R&R away from the destruction of the battlefield, lest they snap from the horrors they had witnessed. Meanwhile, however, he was stuck back in Spain babysitting a traumatized teenager in the middle of a warzone.

Colonel Strider had not stopped looking at him with some measure of pity before the man left for England as well.

Bereft of Regiment and Battalion, Harry was now essentially a one-man artillery squadron, and Major-General Johnson knew it. Lacking a proper military unit to get assigned to—as he was not being transferred officially—Johnson took it upon himself to keep Harry occupied…by means of employing his magic against the enemy.

The problem was that this was magic being unleashed on an extremely stubborn and bullish opponent, and so Harry was often called in to level a square or two in order to get the enemy running. So often, in fact, that he was starting to get nightmares from the devastation he was incurring on the enemy—not that he would ever admit it.

The issue was, however, that it was quickly coming to the point where it was impossible to hide from Josefina. More than once, she would wake up from her sleep as he jolted awake with a muffled cry, his face heavy with sweat and his eyes appearing more haunted with every passing day. Heavy bags were forming underneath his eyes, and she had noticed that his hands would shake whenever the topic of his magic would come up.

The problem was that Harry had always been a calculating and pragmatic person…and yet still hopelessly naïve, he realized. When he had offered the brass full use of his magic, he had expected them to use him as they would a howitzer—carefully, with precision and tact. Instead, they were using him as a sort of carpet bombing instrument. Everywhere he went, he was asked not to simply set fire to emplacements, but to level them.

The worst part was the clean-up work afterwards. As the Spanish North Eastern Army's lines contracted further into the city, Harry was forced to see the effects of his handiwork just by passing back the ruins. On more than one occasion, he had seen charred arms sticking out from the rubble, and the one time he had actually tried to touch one, it promptly disintegrated into ash.

It didn't help that Major General Johnson kept praising him for his work, either, or reminding him that every such attack saved thousands of British lives. It was true, he realized, but it also didn't seem to hold as much weight as it used to, especially whenever the images of the burnt corpses flashed in his mind.

And Josefina…how could he take care of a traumatized girl when he was rapidly reaching that same level of trauma? Even worse was the fact that the girl was clearly interested in him in a fashion that was more than appropriate between guardian and care, which Harry refused to entertain out of loyalty to both Elicia and his own ambitions. If he could not have Elicia by his side, then he would only settle for those women who could further his ambitions—no one else.

A noise coming from his bed snapped Harry back to reality.

'Speaking of which…' he thought as he watched the teen discreetly roll onto her side and peek at him. She had done this several times before—always believing that he didn't notice. She had, unfortunately, underestimated just how noisy the cot was when one

moved on it. It also helped that his nerves were on edge from the recent mission to level yet another city block in Burgos.

It took a few seconds of 'discreet' peeking before Harry decided to put an end to it. "Bad dreams?" he asked kindly, although there was a subtle note of impatience in his tone.

He remained impassive as he heard the girl squeak at the sudden question, having believed that her guardian had been asleep in his chair. "N-No, sir," she quickly replied, her words thickly accented. "T-trouble sleeping."

Harry nodded—it was as plausible an explanation as any, considering the continuous sound of cannon fire and explosions that had fast become a simple addition to the local environment. Considering the fact that she had a history of staying up to peek at him, however, he wasn't about to buy it that simply.

"Go to sleep, Josefina," he told her firmly. "Young girls like you need their rest."

"I-I'm trying…" she mumbled almost inaudibly. "B-But the cannons…"

Harry sighed. He really didn't want to put up a silencing ward, considering that sound was one of the best ways of knowing how things were on a battlefield. "You'll learn to ignore them, I promise," he reassured her. "I have. For the most part, anyway."

"C-Could you maybe…" she asked in a soft voice, much like a child. "…tell me a story?"

Harry blinked. Surely he hadn't heard right. "A story?" he parroted.

Josefina nodded shyly. "Mama and Papa would tell me stories when I was younger," she told him. "Especially whenever I had a bad dream…they would always come to tell me a story…"

Harry mentally sighed. What was he, her father? Now there was an odd idea. Harry could barely conceive of himself as a normal person, much less a father. To his own mind, it was not something that he could look forward to—even if he did manage to succeed in his dreams. He may have children, true, but he would never really be

their father, now would he? He would be the supreme leader. The metaphorical father of all his subjects.

Besides, a man whose hands were as dirtied by blood and ash as his own had no right to call any child his own, right? How could he ever possibly allow an innocent child to become tainted with his bloodstained hands? Being a father was like being with Elicia…a stupid, wonderful dream—it would always eventually give way to reality.

Still…maybe he could play the part, just this once? Dream a little, so to speak?

That thought was immediately succeeded by panic. What story would he tell? He couldn't really remember of any his mum used to tell him when he was younger. At school, it was probably one of the last things he thought about! What possible story would be good enough to get her to relax…?

Harry's eyes widened with sudden realization, silently thanking God for hindsight. Shifting himself so he would be more comfortable, he smiled at Josefina in the dark and nodded. "Alright then. One story," he told her firmly, and was slightly tickled by the enthusiastic nod from the teenage girl.

Taking a deep breath, he focused his mind on his childhood memories and smiled up at the tent ceiling. "Once upon a time, there was a happy couple living in a peaceful land…their names were James and Lily, and they were expecting their first son, whom they decided to call…Harry…."

Burgos, Spain, June 24th, 2009 (D-Day +138)…

Harry looked up from his paperwork with a stunned look.

"You want me to what?" he asked incredulously as he stared at Josefina, who was sitting rather primly on the other side of his desk.

"I want you to teach me how to fight," she repeated, her words still heavily accented due to English being her second language.

Harry laid down his pen and rubbed his forehead with his now free hand. "Josefina, why on earth would you want to learn how to fight?"

he asked. "I'm here to protect you, aren't I? After the war's over, you won't need to fight anymore."

The teenaged Spanish girl was not to be deterred however. "My parents are d-dead," she said firmly, stuttering only at the last word slightly—a marked improvement over the first time he'd goaded the location of her parents out of her. "I have no uncles or aunts that I know of…and I was seconds away from becoming a rape victim. I want to learn how to fight."

Harry gazed at her silently for a moment before nodding, conceding to her argument. "I'll see if I can get one of the sergeants to include you in their training sess—"

He was quickly interrupted by the girl's fierce headshake. "No! I want you to teach me!" she clarified.

Harry blinked. "Me? Josefina, I'm not even the best fighter there is in this army!" he protested.

Very deliberately, she raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Nothing happened—of course, but it was a very clear message she was sending her guardian. "Teach me how to fight…please…" she repeated, this time a lot softer and her head bowed.

Even as he finally understood what she wanted, Harry still shook his head. "I'm sorry, Josefina…you…don't have that gift," he told her sincerely. "Not everyone does."

Josefina seemed to think he was deliberately trying to direct her away from using such powers, however. "I don't believe you!" she said hotly.

Harry sighed. "Josefina…this is something maybe one in a million can use," he guessed wildly, not knowing the exact figure. "If it wasn't, don't you think the generals would have me training everyone in this camp to use it? Don't you think they'd leave me alone and send others to do their dirty work?"

Josefina blanched at his words, and Harry figured he'd hit something tender. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Josefina…why do you want to learn magic?" he asked with some suspicion.

The poor raven-haired girl was quiet for a moment, biting her lower lip nervously, before breaking down before him. "I want to help!" she all but yelled at him, causing him to have to wave away the two guards outside who had been moving in to see what the disturbance was. "I…want to help…" she repeated softly, her hands tightened into fists on her lap and her head bowed.

"Help with what, Josefina?" he asked gently, actually quite curious.

"You," she replied just as simply. "I want to help you."

"Me?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

She quickly nodded her head. "At that time…you saved me," she reminisced, and he didn't need any sort of clue to guess what she was talking about. "Now…all I can do in return is wait here every day…taking your bed from you…watching you come back with ghosts in your eyes…I want to help….you…"

Harry felt truly touched by the girl's words. With Elicia, it had always been an unspoken understanding that they would support each other in every decision the other made, and with John, it was the agreement that came with being best friends. William, for his part, had always intimated, though never outright said, that as his brother, he would always be behind him, no matter their past, present, or future disagreements. Josefina, however, was the first person to have actually said the words.

That didn't mean, however, that he was about to let someone else get dragged into a hellish life because of him.

"Josefina…" he spoke softly. "…I'm touched you feel that way, I really am. But…this isn't a life I would wish on you."

Josefina shook her head violently. "I can help!" she protested. "I can! Just…give me a chance!"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, Josefina. I can't, in good conscience, allow you to get dragged into such a hellish life on my behalf. That's my final word on that."

Josefina looked up at him and glared viciously, obviously refusing to accept his ultimatum. Silently, she stormed out of the tent, though

Harry wasn't worried that she would wander into the battlefield—she knew better. At best, she'd hang out with some of the soldiers, and come back later. Sighing, he lowered his head and got back to work.

Josefina, for her part, was fuming from her guardian's refusal to let her help—though, academically, she knew why. Compared to him, she was nothing but a naïve little girl, frail and helpless. Where he could level entire blocks and bounce back bullets, she could barely hold up one of the more substantial stacks of paperwork that adorned his desk. If he brought her alongside him, she would be nothing more than a liability.

"Carajo!" she swore vehemently, kicking away a discarded can that must've rolled out from the mess tents. She was bitterly frustrated, and had no outlet for it. No sergeant within the Army would train her for fear of her guardian's retaliation even if she asked herself.

She was thankful, to a certain extent, that he wanted to keep her out of harm's way, but she was equally lucid enough to realize that her chances at a "normal" life had died away when her parents had and she'd been nearly raped. Even if she spent the rest of her life in a supposedly "normal" household and grew up to be a "normal" person, the memories of the war would make her anything but normal. Being an orphan also meant that she would likely have to endure hardships no one else would.

More importantly, why was he allowing others to help him, but not her? Did that woman he calls Elicia have something she didn't, besides a guaranteed fuck every time they met? Did his brother William possess some sort of supernatural talent that made him invaluable to her guardian? What about that Lyles fellow—the one who'd been his best friend from childhood? She had never heard her guardian describe him as anything more than an average guy, yet she got the feeling that even he was deeper in her guardian's confidences than she was.

So what did she not have that all these people did? What aspect of them made them necessary to her guardian, and how could she obtain it, and in doing so make him realize her worth?

"Oi!"

She snapped her head up to see the face of a slightly irritated muscular man who was staring down at her as though she'd been a naughty child. Instinctively cringing at the expression, she took a step back as her eyes swept across the man's muscular form.

What instantly caught her attention—besides the incredibly old-fashioned Burnside-style moustache—was the winged sword emblem of the Special Air Service on the man's left shoulder and on the red beret he wore. The next thing that caught her attention, however, was the discarded can she'd kicked at his feet.

Swallowing nervously, she slowly looked back up and saw him nod at her unspoken realization that she'd kicked the can at him without knowing so.

"Didn't anyone tell you kicking cans at people was impolite?" he asked roughly as he eyed the girl from head to toe, as one would a piece of unsatisfactory cattle. "For that matter, who are you, and what are you doing in a military camp, lass?"

She stayed silent as she cringed in visible fear of the man—who clearly looked like he could break her in two with his bare hands. To her relief—and almost immediate horror—several men seemed to arrive behind the SAS serviceman, all of them wearing the same emblems on their berets, though bereft of their combat jackets in favour of the olive muscle shirts.

"What's going on, sir?" one of them asked.

The man looked to his side and kept an even stare. "Got hit in the shin by this lass' errant can, is what happened," he replied.

She heard one of the men laugh. She'd seem him stare at her for a moment before returning his attention to his superior. "Oh, come on, Captain—I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it!" he assuaged his boss before looking at Josefina with kind eyes. "Right, lass?"

The Captain harrumphed at the interruption but seemed to let go of his irritation as he saw the girl still cringing from him. "Fine," he conceded, deflating as he uncrossed his arms and patted Josefina—who had frozen in fear—on the head once. "Sorry I gave you a scare there, luv," he apologized, though there remained some

confusion in his eyes. "But seriously, though…who are you, and what are you doing here? This isn't a place for civvies!"

Slowly, Josefina managed to calm down, realizing that these men would not harm her. Though she opened her mouth several times to reply, she felt no words leave her mouth, and it took her four tries before she could enunciate her name. "J-Josefina, sir…" she introduced herself meekly. "I-I'm s-staying w-with M-Major W-White."

She heard one of the men snap their fingers in realization. "Oi, I know him!"

She felt the Captain remove his hand from her head and looked over at the talking soldier. "Oh? Do tell, Soap."

The man made a grimace at the nickname. "He was in a fencing tourney a few years back," he recalled. "Wiped the floor with the regional champion. Quite the fight, too—he was on the ropes for a while before his opponent got all big-headed and gave him an opening," he finished with a smile before looking at Josefina. "If that guy's your guardian, I'd say you're in safe hands, lass."

"Wasn't he involved in some sort of incident a few weeks ago?" asked another. "I seem to recall some of the Army chaps gossiping about a Captain and a Major having a tuffle with four drunken soldiers."

The Captain snorted in disdain as he crossed his arms over his chest again. "Bah. Army. No discipline," he judged roughly. "Give 'em a week through SAS training, and I'll bet you all of them break."

Josefina's ears perked up at this, though at the time, she had no idea why. "Y-You're s-stronger t-than A-Army s-soldiers?" she asked, her nervous stutter still quite heavy.

All of the group of SAS servicemen seemed to stare at her for what seemed to be an eternity before they all—even the Captain—burst out laughing. It wasn't a mocking laugh, but rather one you would typically hear at the end of a good joke.

"Damned right we are!" the Captain exclaimed proudly. "Second to none! That's the SAS way!"

A bright—or maybe not so bright, considering one's point of view—idea popped into her head at that point. "C-Could you make me stronger?" she asked, surprised at her own bravery for voicing the question.

Not as surprised as the SAS servicemen, however, who were staring at her as though she'd called herself the Queen and ordered them to make her pie. It was the Captain who replied to her, eventually.

"No."

He'd said it flatly, without any sort of emotion. His piercing stare looking right through her, she was rooted to the spot as he gave his final dictum.

"Please!" she tried again, taking a brave step forward. Other than a raised eyebrow, the Captain stared at her impassively. After a moment of silence, he turned his back on her and began to walk away.

"Let's go, lads," he ordered roughly. The other servicemen looked at Josefina with some measure of pity and disbelief before similarly turning their backs on her and walking away with their Captain.

They'd gotten a few steps away from her when the Captain turned his head slightly and addressed Josefina once more.

"Don't underestimate the SAS, lass," he told her roughly, his eyes hidden by the beret's shadow. "No one but the most tenacious, most daring people alive may call themselves one of us. We don't pick up strays."

With that final statement said, the Captain led his men away, leaving behind a dismayed young girl.

Burgos, Spain, July 14th, 2009 (D-Day +158)…

The next two weeks had been full of surprises for Harry.

First of all, Josefina had actually asked him to train her to become a fighter so she could help him in his goals—which he'd of course rejected. Then, after a brief storming out of his tent, he'd watched

her return, practically broken-spirited, and immediately asked her what had happened. When she told him she was fine, he'd been a bit dubious, but as she didn't seem to reek of sex or anything dodgy, he was somewhat mollified and decided to cease his questioning.

Then, after about four days of sulking, the girl had suddenly sat up in her bunk with this look of utter realization, and immediately gotten changed before speeding out of the tent, much to his surprise. Usually, it took his presence to get her outside, though as of recent, it was mostly out of his own concern for her safety than her own trauma. This time, however, she'd been insistent that he let her take a "stroll" through the camp unsupervised, reminding him that between his paperwork and the fact that she knew many of the soldiers in the immediate vicinity from previous walks, she would be fine and he should get back to work. What surprised him most, however, was the fact that she wouldn't return until much later in the afternoon, always with a determined look, and then proceed to do the same thing the very next day. He was tempted to have her followed, but knew that would shatter any trust she held for him, so he held back.

However, this routine of hers had been going on for the past week, and each time she came back with the same look, causing him no slight amount of nervousness. Would the Military Police be mad at him for letting her wander that way? It was surprising that they hadn't already brought it to his attention to begin with, considering the fact that she was a foreign national—even though she had been the victim of trauma.

Of course, he had little time—or energy—to pursue that line of investigation. Burgos was on the verge of falling to the 2nd Army, and additional forces from Britain had ensured that the North-Eastern provinces of Spain were firmly now under British control. That meant that Harry was being called in even more frequently to take care of the remaining pockets of resistance within Burgos, to ensure complete domination of the city. Already, civilians that had stayed behind to help the Spanish Eastern Army were beginning to surrender in droves, hoping to be spared the fiery death that seemed to accompany the British offensives around the city. Much of the city itself had been destroyed as well, and no one was under any illusions regarding the horrific cost of reconstruction—nevermind the death tolls.

With Burgos, however, the British Armed Forces had decisively proven to the Spanish government the breadth of their determination. Though, by that same token, so had the Spanish forces with their stubborn defence of the ruined city. From what Harry had heard, both sides had begun (somewhat pre-emptively, in his opinion) implementing an award to be given to those who specifically participated at the Siege of Burgos, to commemorate the sheer difficulty of the battle. Harry imagined that most of the hype being formed about the battle was probably being used in propaganda—as all major battles tended to be. What those pictures and sound bytes could never show, however, was the constant smell of burning flesh and plastic that seemed to follow him wherever he went and no matter how much he washed. They could never show the horror of finding the charred remains of his victims, or the devastation being felt by the civilians they captured and held nearby as they watched their homes burn.

But what was most surprising about the week was the news that within a few days, his Regiment would be returning, and Michael White, the MP for Liverpool—also known as Sirius Black—would be accompanying them for a tour of the front lines, apparently also bearing some important news for the troops. He hadn't expect that—well, he had expected his regiment to return to the front lines someday, as all regiments were had to, but he hadn't expected Sirius, of all people, to come along for the ride. His job was, unlike Harry's, to stay in the background, working the Parliament to a place where he could then move with as little hindrance as possible in the future. What on earth was he doing, coming to such a high-profile and dangerous place?

Harry couldn't wait till he saw his dear godfather. He'd then be able to give him a piece of his mind.

Burgos, Spain, July 31st, 2009 (D-Day +177)…

"You know, most people welcome their relatives with open arms and a smile," Sirius observed idly as he watched his godson pace in his tent, the guards long dismissed on the basis of this being a private family reunion.

"Most people also don't hide their identities and manipulate the highest legislative body of their country for the sake of their ambitions," Harry snapped back. "What on earth possessed you to

come here? Besides that fancy speech about the budget increase—which, mind you, any bloody clerk could have announced!"

Sirius raised an amused eyebrow. "What, can't I come see my dear nephew?" he stressed the word, reminding his godson of their assumed identities. "After all, I did get the budget for this little war increased by playing up the sentimental card," he reminded his godson calmly, legs crossed and hands steepled before him.

"And I'm appreciative of that," Harry replied evenly. "But we both know that your job is to stay in Britain and fix things for us to move more easily, not strut into an active battlefield."

Sirius scoffed. "Please," he said dismissively. "What do you take me for? I know what I'm supposed to do. James and Lily made that quite clear, and trust me, I'm loving every minute of it," he told his godson. "But fine, you want to know why I'm here? I have news from that girl, Elicia, as well as some interesting information from my contacts in the Magical World."

Harry raised an eyebrow and finally sat down. "Oh? Do tell," he prompted.

"Which one first? Your sweetheart or the information?" asked Sirius mischievously.

Harry glared for a moment but then sighed. "Ellie."

Sirius barked out a laugh before settling for a smirk. "Turns out your little secret girlfriend's experiments are beginning to take form," he informed his godson. "She's reported that the fuel crystals seem to have much greater potential than just Floo Powder, though she's still working on how much exactly."

"And the deposits?" asked Harry. "We need her well supplied, after all."

"Already taken care of," Sirius assured him. "I had my account manager at Gringotts set up a Floo Powder processing company and bought out at least half a dozen deposits. Since most mages aren't aware of how much fuel crystals are needed for making Floo Powder, they won't miss a couple missing from the stack now and then."

"Speaking of Gringotts…"

Sirius nodded. "That's part of what I wanted to tell you," he pre-empted Harry. "The negotiations are still ongoing—nothing's certain yet, but the fact that they're willing to set up the Floo Powder processing company tells me that they're giving it a lot of thought," he relayed. "I wouldn't worry too much, however. I've made them an offer they couldn't refuse."

"Any offer can be refused, Uncle," Harry reminded Sirius.

Sirius shook his head. "Not the one I made," he riposted. "Tell me, Harry, what do you know of the financial comings and goings of the Ministry of Magic?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing." Harry replied bluntly.

Sirius smiled conspiratorially. "Then you haven't heard that they're up to their eyeballs in debt, eh?" he informed his now surprised godson. He relished the look, as he was often the one giving said look whenever his godson and he spoke. "It's true. The Ministry's financial soundness has been rocky, for at least half a year now. They've been borrowing from Gringotts like it's going out of style to fund the Ministry's new 'War on Dark Magic.'" he saw Harry nod in understanding. "Apparently, this has the Goblins throwing a fit, as the Ministry keeps taking and taking, without paying back much of the accrued interest. That means they're forced to raise the interest rates to make up the difference through other debts, but at the same time it ensures no one else wants to borrow money, because paying it back would be a nightmare in and of itself."

Harry realized where Sirius was going now. "So what do they want, exactly?" he asked, wanting to make sure.

"They want their losses recouped," Sirius explained. "Which is, for us at least, an easier task, given that gold outside the Wizarding world is much cheaper than at the rate it's being sold at among mages."

"And that's it?" asked Harry dubiously. Goblins, though notoriously greedy creatures, were also quite clever, and getting bought off so easily didn't sit right with his impression of them.

Sirius smiled. "Of course not. The promise of payment got me in through the door. What really sold them was the promise of becoming the Central Bank," he intimated. "By doing so, they would not only recoup their financial losses from the Ministry, but also come out as the primary financial institution of your government. Good business all around," he summed up.

Harry blanched. "Sirius!" he exclaimed in horror. "We can't promise them that! There's already a Central Bank of England, or have you forgotten?" he reminded his godfather. "How would we even begin to explain to the financial authorities that they're being replaced by non-humans?" he asked, alternating between panic and worry. "We've already determined that there could be a massive backlash towards the idea of humans with magical powers, nevermind another species."

Sirius' smile widened. "Harry, my boy…you underestimate the powers of propaganda and bribery."

Harry looked dubious. "Sirius, this is a huge risk you're forcing us to take," he warned. "I'll trust you, for now, simply because you seem to know what you're doing, and I frankly have no clue about any of this economics talk." he told the older man before switching mental gears and addressing another topic of importance to his mind. "What about the mages in general? What news from them?" he then asked.

Sirius nodded. "A little more on that," he replied simply. "Word is, that chap Scrimgeour…"

"The Head Auror?" asked Harry for clarification.

Sirius nodded. "The very same. Anyway, turns out he's been elected the new Minister of Magic," he relayed.

"I wasn't aware there had been elections recently. Did Bones resign?"

Sirius took a small sip from his tea cup before shaking his head. "More like died, unfortunately," he informed his godson. "Assassinated in Diagon Alley, in broad daylight by a couple of fanatic Voldemort sympathizers."

Harry tsk-tsked at the information. "Pity that. She sounded like a reasonable person," he lamented. "Might have made the imposition of Crown authority all the more smooth with her still in power."

Sirius nodded in agreement. "We don't always get what we want, unfortunately," he reminded his godson.

"What about this Scrimgeour…what's he like? Can we use him?" Harry asked pointedly.

Sirius shrugged. "It depends, truth be told," he admitted. "He's not evil—that's for sure. He'd probably kill himself before working for people like Voldemort. The problem is, he also comes across as a supremacist…albeit a tacit one, at worst."

Harry scowled. "Please tell me he's not of the Dumbledorean persuasion," he pleaded with his godfather.

Sirius shook his head. "Word on the street is that Scrimgeour and Dumbledore don't quite enjoy each other's company," he confided. "Scrimgeour apparently thinks Dumbledore's too soft with his 'second chances' policies, and Dumbledore thinks Scrimgeour is too authoritarian."

"So naturally, the Ministry of Magic is once again at a political impasse in the Wizengamot while the bigots run rampantly free," Harry concluded blithely. "Fantastic. Utterly wonderful," he added sarcastically.

Sirius shrugged again before sipping his tea. "To be fair, it does allow us to move more easily," he pointed out. "If they were on their game, we would be facing an entirely new magnitude of difficulty in trying to smuggle as many discontent mages as we can to the continent. It also helps that half the Auror department is rooting for one side, while the other roots for the other."

Harry chuckled, his previous dark thoughts banished away. "Never thought I'd be cheering for the incompetence of government," he said with a smirk. "But I'll concede that point. Speaking of the continental camps, how are they coming?"

"We haven't been found out, if that's what you're asking," Sirius replied wryly. "It's quite amazing how much a few gold coins in one's pockets will deter a government official from pursuing a particular line of investigation."

Harry nodded. "And the mages themselves?" he pressed.

Sirius waved a hand airily. "They're certainly not on your level, but they're improving," he evaluated. "At the very least, the first batch of them should be ready in a few months. Then we can hand them over to the military for their little Military Mage project."

Harry nodded, satisfied with his godfather's answers. While he had been having second thoughts about sending other people into situations like his, where they would essentially become human weapons for their government, he also knew that this was a necessary sacrifice. If they never got to see the horrors of a battlefield, there was no telling how they would react when—if—war ever broke out on British soil. They had to be ready to face the consequences of their actions against their fellow man and deal with it before they were going to be useful to him and his family's plans.

Of course, not one of them were forcefully made to go through with this. He was pragmatic and in certain aspects, ruthless, but he was not a complete sociopathic control freak. The mages in those isolated training camps were there by choice, and would remain by choice. If, at any point, they wanted out, there was a standing guarantee of their freedom, provided they accepted an Unbreakable Vow never to discuss what they had gone through, heard, or seen at the camps.

He was not about to become the very people he had been plotting against from his childhood. He would not force people onto paths they did not want. His followers would become so out of loyalty, or not at all.

Near Palencia, Spain, August 20th, 2009 (D-Day +197)…

Harry was quiet as he sat in the command jeep, the vehicle's engine silently humming as it sped down the A-62 highway towards Valladolid. After the fall of Burgos a week ago, the 75th Regiment had been almost instantly assigned to assist the 1st Army at Valladolid, which was apparently giving the British forces much more

trouble than Burgos had—which was saying something. Normally, they would have already been there to help, but a few logistical issues had delayed their departure—even if it was just an hour and a half car ride.

Harry shivered as the open-aired jeep raced down the freeway, the rest of the regimental convoy behind them in troop transports. He didn't know why, but he had a horrible feeling about this upcoming mission, even though there was nothing wrong with the planning, on paper. Beside him, Josefina glanced at him curiously as he shivered once again.

"Harry, are you alr—" she never got a chance to finish, as an explosion tore up the road in front of the jeep, forcing the driver to hastily turn away too sharply, and thus resulting in the vehicle flipping over as its tires lost their grip on the concrete ground. Harry's vision went black.

When he finally woke up, the first thing he noticed was the sound of enduring gunfire, with the occasional explosion clueing him in to the fact that there was a battle going on. He then noticed the feeling of scorching heat nearby, and idly wondered whether he had cast a fire spell unconsciously. He quickly shot down that idea as he slowly managed to look backwards and saw the overturned and flaming jeep he last remembered being in.

His thoughts were still quite jumbled at this point. What had happened? Why was there gunfire occurring in an area that should be completely under British control? Hadn't they deviated from the much straighter southern route just because it would be safer?

He suddenly felt something scratch at his face and flinched, cursing under his breath at the pain. Touching the wound on his left cheek, he was mildly concerned to see that his hand was now covered in blood, but quickly dashed those fears when he saw the small particles of broken concrete latched onto his hand. A ricochet. That probably meant the wound was just superficial.

Closing his eyes—no reason to give the enemy any reason to target him, if they had any snipers within range—he slowly had each of his limbs twitch ever so slightly and assessed that he was still whole. His legs hurt like hell, however, and he wouldn't be surprised if, upon closer inspection, they were found to be heavily lacerated from

the car flip. Similarly, he felt his torso explode with pain every time he tried to move. Opening his eyes again, he stared up at the sky and glowered. It was just his luck that they would fall into an enemy ambush.

Lowering his eyes, however, he froze at the sight of a piece of steel sticking out of his abdomen. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Had he really been that out of it? Upon deeper reflection, he realized this was the reason his torso was in constant agony, but knew better than to remove it outright without immediate medical attention on hand. Doing so would likely make him bleed out, and he really was in no rush to die. He had Ellie to go back to, and William, Isabella, John, his mum, his dad, Sirius…Josefina.

Harry froze again, his mind finally back in full gear as the sounds of battle became ever so clearer. Where was his charge? She had been with him in the jeep when it had flipped, so rationally she had to be nearby, right?

Still, the jagged piece of metal sticking out of his stomach was a bit of a dampener for his ambitions to stand up and look for his wayward charge. Getting up would probably only exacerbate the wound, and quite probably accelerate his demise. Doing nothing, on the other hand, was just unacceptable, even though the men in the regiment would have probably understood if he just lied there and waited for help. Taking it out, on the other hand, would probably be met with widespread derision for having done such a stupid fucking thing.

Harry sighed as his thoughts raced to achieve some sort of compromise between the two extremes of immediate death and passive waiting. An almost casual glance at the burning wreckage of his former jeep gave him an idea that, although remarkably stupid, would also serve his purposes. Being that he was in a bit of a hurry, in the middle of an ongoing battlefield, and unbelievably pissed off at the situation, Harry decided to risk it and put his hands around the metal shard, grasping it tightly between both hands.

Then, with a grunt, he began to pull, and almost felt his consciousness slip away as the excruciating pain hit his nervous system. What the hell had he been thinking? This was fucking painful! Thankfully, his will was made of sterner stuff, and he managed to stay conscious as he pulled at the shard with all his

might, practically feeling the jagged edges do a number on his insides and seeing the occasional spurt of blood at the wound as he pulled up.

"Come on!" he hissed angrily at himself. "Come up, you stupid little fuck!"

Harry now knew that the action movies where the actors did this sort of crap casually were full of it. It was a goddamned miracle by itself that he hadn't passed out yet form carving up his internal organs with this supremely idiotic move of his! Anger flooded his system as he imagined that his Spanish opponents had probably thought him dead with their little explosion. He felt his arm muscles tense up painfully as he kept at it, his consciousness fighting a desperate battle for survival.

"Think this'll take me down, Spanish fucks?" he roared defiantly, his hands so tightly wrapped against the jagged metal that they, too, were slowly being impaled. "I'll send you all to HELL!"

With a final grunt, he felt the jagged metal finally come loose from his wound and fly away as his hands lost their grip in a sudden display of physical weakness and fell to his sides.

"Christ…that fucking hurt," he breathed heavily, still painfully aware that his torso was quickly becoming a vampire's wet dream as the now empty wound began to flood with his blood. "Well…in for a penny, in for a pound…or whatever," he grunted as he raised his right hand and spread it out above his head, blocking the sun's rays from hitting his face.

Closing his eyes, he channelled as much magic as he thought was wise for this next particular move and let it move towards his right hand, after which he lowered it until he heard a nasty, wet noise that, coupled with the sudden wetness of his hand, it had reached the flooded wound. Then, with only a fraction of a second of hesitation, he performed his next monumentally stupid action of the day.

"Ardere," he whispered, and howled in pain as his hand suddenly lit itself on fire and began immediately cauterizing the open wound. It took every ounce of his remaining willpower not to black out from the pain and leave the wound semi-cauterized, which would have only made things a hell of a lot worse.

The pain was un-freaking-believable. If he thought taking out a metal shard from his torso had been bad, this was as close to hellish torture as he could imagine. His nerves were already going haywire from the amount of pain he'd otherwise already been in, and now with him effectively setting himself on fire, his poor nervous system was on the verge of systemic collapse.

He scoffed almost arrogantly as he pushed back at the pain, the scent of charred flesh filtering through his nose. "Whining about a little fire? Me?" he growled under his breath, not noticing that his previous yells had gone unnoticed in the ongoing battle as the sound of gunfire and explosions drowned him out.

After a few seconds—had it really taken that little time?—Harry dropped the spell and allowed himself a few seconds of repose as he breathed deeply, still trying to bring the pain under control.

It took a few minutes, but Harry soon felt well enough to try to get back onto his feet, though he was under no impression that he didn't need to seek out medical attention the moment he could without getting shot at by the enemy. Slowly getting back to his feet, he stumbled a few times as his pained legs wavered under his weight. Very carefully, he took one step, then another—always making sure he was hidden by the burning wreckage of the jeep—and made looked around for any other survivors or bodies. To his great relief—thus far—he could not see Josefina's body anywhere, which probably meant that she had been dragged away or was still alive. Looking behind him, he saw that the 75th Regiment's convoy had stopped as soon as the jeep had all but exploded and the soldiers were using the armoured supply trucks they had been moving in as cover.

He briefly considered running over, considering that he was an officer and thus responsible for keeping the fight organized, but something struck him as odd. Why hadn't the air patrols noticed the ambushing forces? It wasn't as though Britain was necessarily lacking in air forces, after all. Besides the Navy, the Royal Air Force was probably the most well-funded of the three main branches, leaving the Army and Artillery to typically suffer as a result. That meant that their patrols should have noticed something, considering their high-tech equipment.

That cold shiver he'd felt prior to the ambush returned in full force as Harry quickly kneeled by a section of the jeep that wasn't on fire and brought up his right hand. Setting his fingers ready for a snap, he aimed them down at the floor and concentrated on the spell he wanted.

"Magus Revelo," he intoned as he snapped his fingers. He smiled in satisfaction as the spell went off flawlessly and hit the ground, where the spell quickly got to work. The Magic Reveal spell was a damned useful thing to know he concluded as he watched the spell literally trace different arcane symbols on the ground as it did its job.

Much like a normal radar, it formed a circular shape on whatever surface it was cast and, surrounded by various arcane and runic symbols, it would then scan the immediate area (roughly a circle of 10 kilometres in every direction from the point of origin) for any uses of magic beside its own. From what Harry understood, the Ministry of Magic had several, higher powered yet far more ancient variations of this spell working at all times in the Ministry itself, ostensibly to monitor underage magic.

A ping made Harry's stomach plummet. Sure enough, there was a mage in the near vicinity, and wards had been put up to…Harry narrowed his eyes. He wasn't familiar with that particular ward. Judging from the effects and size, he had to guess it was meant to camouflage an area from view…but it didn't seem quite right. He sighed in frustration—he hated not knowing something.

Still, this made something exceedingly clear. Someone in the Spanish Ministry had probably wised up about his presence, or at least suspected the British of using a mage in a Muggle war—which was by itself reason enough for one Ministry to declare war on another. On the off chance that this was merely meant to test that theory, Harry wasn't willing to blow his cover and bring down a legion of Ministry-trained mages to make life impossible on the British Army.

Glancing down at the magical radar, he concluded that this was the most likely scenario, considering the fact that there was only one mage in the vicinity, and judging from its location on the magical screen, he or she was not directly incorporated with the Spanish troops. That meant he had to fight these ambushers the old fashioned way. Unfortunately, he was also quite cut off from his men,

as the nearest supply truck was a good fifteen meters away. Injured as he was, he'd be slow enough to give any mediocre shot a good target if he tried to make a run for it.

Cursing silently to himself, he quickly dispelled the Magic Reveal spell and looked over to the men defending the trucks. He quickly caught sight of one face he was familiar with.

"Harrison!" he shouted loudly. He cringed as he promptly heard several bullets hit the jeep's smouldering wreckage. Clearly, not the best idea he'd had.

Nonetheless, the person in question quickly turned to look at him and he saw a look of utter relief on the man's face, which truthfully did not serve to raise Harry's confidence.

"Sir!" Harrison shouted back. "Thank god you're alive!"

Harry nodded. "Sit Rep!" he ordered loudly over the gunfire.

Harrison, kneeling by the front of the truck, made covert motions to the other side, towards the hills by the road. "Bastards completely flanked us, sir!" he shouted back at his superior. "Most of Dog Company has been killed, and the rest of us are barely holding on!"

Harry cursed silently. "How many do we still have?"

"Charlie Company is good to go, sir!" Harrison shouted back. "Easy is holding down the rear of the convoy, Bravo is holding down the middle, and Albert is moving to plug up the hole left by Dog!"

One company. One. 200 men, at best, against an unknown number of enemy troops dug in at higher ground. It was like something out of a tactician's worst nightmare.

"Anyone have a functional radio over there?" he shouted anxiously.

Harrison turned to talk to his comrades, and after a few minutes of deliberation—and probably a call down the line to see if any of the companies had one—Harrison turned and nodded. Harry let out a breath of relief at the news. At least the magical field hadn't completely screwed them over.

"Call in air support!" he ordered. "On my authority! Recognition code Mike-Foxtrot-Whiskey-Zero-Zero-Eight-Niner!"

Harrison gave him a thumbs up in acknowledgement and turned to his nearest comrade, obviously relaying the order. It didn't take long after that, thankfully. Though he guessed there was a small delay while the pilots protested that their equipment had found nothing on the hill, Harry's identification code ensured that the brass had to taken his request very seriously, as he was far more capable of detecting magical threats than any common soldier. Thus, just for safety's sake, a strike was ordered at the given coordinates, and it was with great pleasure that Harry watched as the side of the hill was suddenly lit on fire as precision missiles detonated right on target.

Taking full advantage of the distraction, Harry also booked it for the trucks, getting dragged behind them by Harrison and another soldier as he neared them and stumbled. Fortunately, the Spanish ambushers were too busy reeling from the air strike to bother killing him.

Breathing heavily, he leaned against the deflated tire of the truck and stared at Harrison for a moment, nodding thankfully for the assist. Quickly, however, he got back to business. "Okay…now I need a more in depth sit-rep," he said evenly. "How many officers dead?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Harrison seemed uncomfortable relaying the news, however. "Colonel Strider is dead," he informed his superior, feeling guilty as he saw the Major blanch. "So are the lieutenant colonels. Major Weir is dead too—hit by a stray bullet. Major Heyes is critically wounded, but we're managing to keep him alive, somehow."

Harry nodded silently, taking in the officer casualty list dully. He'd liked Strider—he was a good man who stood up for his men against the brass when he felt they were being pushed too hard. Lieutenant Colonel Williams hadn't been all bad either. The tragic irony was that his own immediate superior, Lieutenant Colonel Sink, had returned to active duty just days ago, retaking command of the battalion from Harry—all the while complaining that any more sick time would have killed him. Now, he was dead, barely a week into his re-established command.

Harry was no fool, either. He realized that Harrison had purposely listed the officer casualties by order of succession, meaning that Harry was now, technically, the CO of the 75th Regiment pro tempore until they got to 2nd Army HQ. He had no illusions that he'd be given command of the regiment outright upon return, however. Even if they did decide to promote him, they could only really do so to Lieutenant Colonel if they wanted to be fair. Promoting him to full Colonel at this point would reek of favouritism.

Thinking quietly, Harry came to a conclusion. He could think of all this more in depth once he reached a British encampment. For now, he had to get his men out of this situation alive.

"Right," he said stoically. "Harrison!"

"Sir!"

"I want eyes on the hill—tell me what the enemy's doing!"

"Yes, sir!"

Harry didn't have to wait long for the report to come in.

"Sir, they seem to be in disarray!" Harrison reported. "Wilkins reports a huge commotion within their ranks!"

Harry nodded, withdrawing his service pistol from its holster and drawing confused looks from the men around him. "There's a mage up there with them," he explained simply. "They probably want to see if it's true that we have a mage on our side as well."

Harrison nodded. "No need to let them know, eh?" he mused, causing Harry to nod.

"Exactly," he agreed, before leaning his head slightly out of cover to glance at the situation on the hill. Good, they were still in some sort of mass confusion. "Harrison, call in the flyboys again. Tell them to give the same area another dose. Then round up Charlie Company and get ready to move out on my command."

"Yes, sir!"

Harry shifted his stance into a crouch as he waited for his orders to get carried out. Glancing down the makeshift line, he could already see the members of Charlie Company bunching up by the gaps between the trucks and getting ready to move, meaning that the order to resume aerial bombing had gone through.

He didn't have to wait long thereafter for the bombing to resume once more. He had barely managed to even register the sound of jet engines screaming through the sky before the hillside was once again decorated with massive explosions, giving him the signal he wanted.

"NOW!" he roared as he moved out of cover and raced towards the hill. "MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!"

With a fierce war cry, the men of Charlie Company wasted no time in following their CO's orders, already catching up to the wounded man as they raced towards the hillside to capitalize on the damage the bombings had incurred.

Every step hurt like hell for Harry. Every single step. Yet, flooded as he was with adrenaline, the only thing he could feel for sure at this point was the rapid beating of his heart as he led—or was led, considering how many were passing him by—his men up the hillside. About one hundred meters of uphill forest they had to run, give or take, before they reached the bombed out Spanish positions.

The first shots that Charlie Company fired up at their ambushers went without enemy response, given the disorganized state the runs had left them in. They quickly recovered, however, as they realized they were now under frontal attack.

Machine gun fire opened up on Charlie Company, and it was thanks to the forest around them that they weren't immediately cut down in their entirety. Nevertheless, a good dozen perished in the opening volleys before an ingenious member grabbed a grenade from his belt and threw it at the gun nest, making it detonate spectacularly and impressing upon the others the solution to the machine gun problem.

Gun nests, however, were not their entire issue. Upon jumping over the sand-bagged stockades around the ambush position, Harry quickly realized that the Spanish army hadn't been screwing around

with this ambush of theirs. At least three Companies worth of enemy soldiers were running around in a desperate attempt at refortifying their position. Harry wasn't about to let that happen, however.

Quickly making the short jump over the sandbag wall, he took almost casual aim with his pistol and opened fire, hitting an enemy soldier with sergeant stripes twice in the head. Taking more careful aim, his next volley ended the life of a man wearing Lieutenant insignia. His men were not far behind him in opening fire, either, and quickly, dozens of Spaniards were falling to the ground heavily injured or dead.

Taking cover behind a couple of barrels of water—or so he presumed, considering their lack of gasoline smell—Harry ejected his pistol clip and reloaded as quickly as possible before dispatching another three soldiers who had wanted to take advantage of the lull in his firing to eliminate him, given that he seemed to be the highest ranked officer around.

Harry wasn't interested in them, however. He wanted the mage that had helped these soldiers murder his comrades. He wanted that person's blood, and he wasn't about to let him or her get away. He waited patiently while the rest of Charlie Company rushed past him, guns blazing and the enemy practically in full retreat from the sudden ground assault, before casting the Mage Reveal spell on the ground once more. The stray thought that the mage could be using the same spell to track him never once crossed his mind. Fortunately for him, it didn't seem so, as the blip on the magical radar appeared exactly in the same place it had been before, which meant the mage was probably hiding somewhere at an elevated altitude, watching the debacle transpire—probably hoping that Harry would snap and use his fire magic and so confirm his existence.

Well, to hell with that.

Carefully, Harry dispelled the spell and moved from cover to cover, often shooting into the confused Spanish ranks to mask his sly manoeuvring towards the mage's probable blind spot. Crossing the entire Spanish camp such that he reached another forest, he circled around the mage's position and came up from behind, his pistol tightly grasped in both hands as he slowly made his way towards his target.

Taking extreme care not to step on any fallen branches or dead leaves, he slowly sidled up to the mage and instantly recognized the figure as female. From her stance, however, he could tell she was no slouch, but she was unfortunately much too absorbed in the fighting before her to notice his approach. Thus, quite easily, he got up behind her, decided to forego his pistol, drew his combat knife, and in one, smooth move, stabbed into her back, right into her left kidney—just as his free hand raced up and silenced her by clapping itself over her mouth.

He felt a bit of moisture in said hand at that point—probably from the silenced scream of pain. That was incomparable to the feeling of blood drenching his knife-wielding hand, however, as he drew out the knife and repeatedly stabbed again and again into the wound. Each time, she convulsed from shock, but his grip was steady and his stabs aimed true. After the fourth stab, however, he ceased his attack and withdrew his knife entirely, letting the woman fall to the ground with a soft thud.

Dispassionately, he cleaned his combat knife with the fallen woman's robes and sheathed it at his side once more before kneeling to the ground, fully aware that the woman was probably still alive, though just barely, and certainly not in any position to use any magic. Her renal artery had been severed, and her kidney torn to shreds. She would bleed out within minutes.

Kneeling by her, he softly turned the body around and felt a pang of regret as he observed the dirtied but otherwise pretty features of the young woman. Such a waste. Unfortunately for her, she had been picked to carry out a job that put her in direct opposition to his goals, and he wasn't about to allow her to ruin things for him.

He watched her wide, brown eyes look at the sky in confusion and desperation, obviously quite aware of her current predicament. Her breathing was ragged and hollow, and her chest barely moved anymore as she desperately clung to life.

Lowering a hand to her face, Harry brushed away a few strands of golden hair. "Sorry luv," he apologized sincerely. "Nothing personal. Just business."

Well, that wasn't entirely true. The fact that numerous of his comrades lay dead was entirely her fault, and he had felt a measure

of satisfaction with every spasm she'd gone through as he stabbed her. Still, it wasn't something he wished to be told on his deathbed, so he refrained from saying so to her.

"N…No q-quiero…" she whimpered pleadingly. "…m-morir…"

Harry was dispassionate as he heard her plead for her life. He'd heard that phrase so often on the battlefield that he no longer needed a translator to tell him what it meant. She didn't want to die. Big surprise. Only the crazies ever truly wanted to die. He answered her pleading with what he typically told the soldiers who pleaded to him.

"Vaya con Dios." Go with God. Why was that phrase sounding so hollow to his ears now?

He watched as her eyes widened slightly, as though something had surprised her, and a last gasp flew between her pinkish lips. Then, nothing. Her chest stopped, her eyes glassed over, devoid of their spark, and the tremulous shaking of her limbs had finally ceased. With great respect, he raised a hand and closed her eyes and mouth, giving her the impression of deep sleep.

She was dead, and he was now in the clear once again.

Harry sighed again. What a damned waste.

Santander, Spain, January 28th, 2010 (D-Day +366)…

Harry woke up groggily, his vision still a little blurry from the massive hangover he was feeling. The previous night, he'd been out celebrating with his fellow Regimental officers the anniversary of the British invasion of northern Spain, with predictable results.

"Oh good, you're up!" a chirpy voice pierced into his consciousness, exacerbating his headache and causing him to groan. He heard the voice scoff and shortly thereafter, a cup of something was thrust into his hands. "Take it, it's what papa used to take after he drank too much."

Well, that certainly narrowed the options for the voice's identity to one. Josefina. Gratefully, he drank the greyish liquid, grimacing at its ungodly awful taste. Though he heard Josefina giggle, he did

acknowledge that his headache seemed to go down some, so he wasn't about to protest. His vision quickly cleared, too, from the shock of the awful drink.

Standing before him was indeed Josefina, her tall, lithe figure looming over him as he sat on the edge of his cot. Predictably, she was staring down at him with a reproachful look and her arms crossed, clearly displeased with his countenance.

"Honestly! A Lieutenant Colonel should not look so shoddy!" she berated him.

Harry grimaced. His promotion to Lieutenant Colonel had come at a cost he was not comfortable with, but it had come, about two months after the ambush at Palencia. With it came the official assignment of 1st Battalion of the 75th Regiment, something Harry was glad to have, although he certainly wished it didn't involve so much paperwork. On the other hand, however, it did give him time to teach Josefina more fluent English, which was starting to show through her slowly developing Anglicized vocabulary. Oh, she'd still swear at him in Spanish, and was his primary interpreter whenever he was dealing with local authorities, but he had always thought that it would be a disgrace not to encourage her to develop her linguistic skills—which were great indeed—more thoroughly simply because of a lack of teachers. As it was, she was already working her way through the first steps of French, as Harry had pointed out that France tended to be the most powerful of the European nations, with Britain only shortly behind.

She still disappeared at times, however—something he'd never quite found out about all these months. Even after recovering from a nasty neck injury during the ambush at Palencia, she had continued her occasional venture out into the military camps and returned during the evening soaked in her own sweat and completely exhausted. After a while, however, he simply dismissed her outings as personal exercise, seeing as her body tone seemed to become more muscular.

"Whatever," he mumbled as he rested his head in his hands. "What's on the books for today, Josie?" he asked wearily. That was another change—he'd insisted on naming Josefina his number one personal assistant, even though there were literally a slew of applicants hoping to get the job. In the end, he hadn't been able to

do so, seeing as how she was neither British nor military personnel, but he had managed to wiggle her into the unofficial position of personal assistant. While she could not access the more restricted files or demand them in his name, she pretty much took care of all his scheduling and delegating.

"Colour Harrison wants a word about changing the drill schedule," she recited off the top of her head. "Major Speirs is due to get released from the hospital today and resuming command of Dog Company; Major Shepherd is on the books for patrol duty today; and a shipment of new recruits is expected to arrive by six in the afternoon."

Harry nodded thankfully. Getting up, he winced slightly at the jolt of pain coming from his torso, an unhappy reminder of his brush with death all those months ago. The doctors had been torn between calling him an idiot and praising him for his ingenuity, but were universally opposed to his decision to lead the attack on the hill; they had called it a "damn fool thing."

Even now, healed far more efficiently thanks to professional medical intervention, the fact that he cauterized the wound essentially condemned him to pangs of pain once in a while from that area, and the doctors had claimed there was nothing they could do to make that go away. Harry could live with it, however. It wasn't fatal, or really even a hindrance—so long as he managed to acclimatize himself to it over time.

"Any word on when our rotation to England is due?" he asked neutrally. It was one thing he'd been hoping a lot to hear about. The higher-ups would never reveal the details, but there was known to be a schedule of rotation whereby each regiment not immediately needed for combat would be given a chance to go home to England and have some leave time. Officially, doing garrison duty, like the 75th now was at Santander, was technically leave time, but nothing ever beat going home.

Josefina shook her head. "Not even a whisper."

Harry's face kept its neutrality at the pronouncement. Throughout his convalescence, he had kept up a steady correspondence with Elicia, and by the tone of her letters, she was becoming borderline hysterical at the fact that she could not be at his side while he lay in

a hospital bed. Then again, it spoke to how battered the 75th Regiment had come out of the ambush that he was essentially tasked with keeping up the Regimental paperwork from his hospital bed.

Colonel Strider was dead, for one, and there were no available Colonels to replace him. Harry himself could not be promoted two ranks without breaking massive amounts of precedents, and so he was merely promoted up to Lieutenant Colonel, patted on the shoulder in a gesture of consolation for his losses, and then promptly given command of the 75th. The way Major General Johnson had insinuated it, there were no plans at the moment to change this arrangement at all, so Harry's position as regimental CO was not pro tempore, as his assignment to the 1st Battalion HQ had initially been, but completely official.

Harry sighed as he pushed himself off his cot and went to get showered and dressed. Another dull day at work, it seemed.

London, United Kingdom, March 28th, 2010…

Sirius was an incredibly proud godfather at the moment.

Word had filtered in from the front lines in Spain that the British forces had finally managed to take down Salamanca after nearly three months of constant, street-by-street fighting. The death toll had been, obviously, horrendous for both sides, but the British forces had, for all intents and purposes, crushed the last Spanish bastion standing between the Northern Front and the 4th Army based in Gibraltar. And at the centre of the success at Salamanca? The 75th Regiment, on loan from the 2nd Army to the 1st, where they distinguished themselves by being the regiment to have made the final push into the centre of the city and captured the enemy HQ. After that, Spanish resistance had all but broken down, and the remaining elements fled east to Madrid, which the British knew would require essentially every last British trooper in Spanish soil to take.

What made Sirius proud of his godson, however, was not so much the fact that his regiment had been the one to seal the British victory, but rather that he was being honoured for it with a Victoria Cross, as the stories coming from the battlefield said that, for the very last push, Harry had personally led the offensive from the top of a loaned

Challenger 2 tank, refusing to back down in his belief that the Spanish lines could be broken once and for all with one final, fast push. Well, granted, the VC wouldn't be just given for this one act of valour above and beyond the call of officer service, but also for his ability to save the 75th from destruction during the ambush at Palencia—again, by leading from the front.

In fact, it was a running thing in Parliament for many of his closer colleagues to idly wonder whether insanity ran in the family, given his own exploits in the honoured chamber. For while Harry was hard at work at being the very best soldier the UK had ever seen, Sirius was hard at work behind the scenes, manipulating public opinion in favour of his godson in particular and always working for the giving of more money towards the Armed Forces—both of which served to cement Harry's heroic presence in the public mind as well as put the Armed Forces firmly in their debt. It was a debt Harry had been craving for quite a while, and even more urgently once it became obvious that the mages in Spain had become suspicious of potential mage involvement in the British army.

That had been one of Sirius' tasks, too—to defuse the Spanish suspicions. To that end, he employed many of his contacts in the mage community to publicly dismiss the suspicions—which were slowly becoming widely known to the British Ministry of Magic—as ridiculous. So far, it had worked, but he was noticing that, with time, it was becoming harder and harder to keep the Ministry at bay in their own suspicions. In fact, he had been recently unable to have his people in the Ministry block a piece of legislation that ordered an immediate reviewing of all census data of the past thirty years to determine who could fit the profile of the mystery mage the Spanish seemed adamant existed within the British forces in Spain. From what he'd been told, there was no immediate danger of them finding out about Harry's true identity, but he was becoming less sure of that fact with every passing report.

Despite his joy for his godson, Sirius sighed as the stress of keeping up the Potters' spy ring, for lack of a better word, crept up on him. He truly wished Lily, James, and Isabella would come back to the UK. Besides missing them dearly—and only being able to see them whenever they briefly visited William in Liverpool—he could also use the help in managing the Ministry contacts, the mage smugglers, and the fuel crystal production facilities. As it stood, however, he was called upon to administrate all of this. Practically by himself.

He'd suggested bringing Remus into the plan, but apparently had been pre-empted by James, who had already brought the taciturn werewolf into the fold and sent him to Europe to administrate the contacts and companies there.

Not that he wasn't enjoying himself, however. In working at Parliament and doing all the Potters' less-than-legal businesses, Sirius had found himself thoroughly enjoying himself, to the point where he believed he'd found his calling in life. At Parliament, he was, ostensibly, the MP for Liverpool, but in reality served more as the voice of the Potters' collective will—which, considering their current base in Liverpool, seemed to coincide with the city's own interests.

The perks were nice, too. Based off his own considerable fortune, now wisely invested in both normal and magical enterprises, he had managed to purchase a rather posh loft in Kensington and Chelsea. Out of it, he could effectively stay near Parliament and at the same time play off his image as an eccentric, yet approachable MP, which had served to make him wildly popular among both the general public and his own constituency. His mage contacts, however, knew that there was a strict policy against Flooing into his home unless in the event of a great emergency, given the fact that he could be hosting important (and more importantly, ignorant) guests at any moment.

Which was why he almost felt a heart attack hit him when he saw the allegedly decorative fireplace suddenly burst into green flames. Just as quickly, a short, pudgy man practically rolled onto his carpeted floor, looking rather dishevelled and panicky.

"Mister Black!" the man cried out. "We have an emergency!"

Quickly pulling out his wand, Sirius silenced the man with a quick flick and then glared at him as he heard the door to his room upstairs open.

"Michael, baby, who is that?" a female voice rang out, causing the short pudgy man to blanch as he realized how much he'd fucked things up. "I heard something about an emergency?"

"No one, darling!" Sirius shouted back to his one-night stand, feeling his heartbeat quicken as he heard her uncovered feet hit the first marble step. "Just the telly!"

The steps stopped. "Oh, okay," the two men heard the woman say. "Why can't I hear it anymore?"

Sirius saw the short man sweat a little and glared at him to stay still. "Muted it, dear!" he called back. "Didn't realize it was so loud when I turned it on!"

"Oh, alright then," the woman replied, and the two men exchanged relieved glances. "Come back to bed soon, okay?"

"Of course! Be right up in a few, alright?"

"See you soon!" the woman called back seductively. The moment the sound of a door closing reached their ears, both men in the living room sagged in relief.

With a quick flick, Sirius put up a one-way silencing ward, allowing him to monitor any other sounds in the apartment, while keeping what was said within he ward silent to outside priers. Only then did he lift the silencing spell from his contact at the Ministry.

"What did I say about Flooing here, Watson?" he hissed angrily. "Thank god that woman's got more air between her ears than brain matter, or else we'd be in a real tight spot!"

The short man bowed feebly in apology at his boss. "So sorry, Mister Black!" he apologized frantically. "I just thought…it's an emergency, you see!"

Sirius calmed himself down enough listen to what his contact had to say. Admittedly, Watson was very good about following protocol, so by that logic, he would never have broken the rules of contact without due cause. Walking over towards the fireplace, he took a seat in his favourite armchair. "Fine. What's the big emergency?" he asked plainly, motioning for Watson to take a seat on the other side of the fireplace.

Watson did so gratefully, his hands still wrangling nervously. "Well, you remember how you had Reid and I look into the Spanish matter

inquiry, right?" he asked and quickly resumed talking when he saw Sirius' irritated glare. "W-Well, Reid's team has supposedly found a major lead."

Sirius froze at the news. That was so very not good. "What kind of lead?" he asked quickly.

Watson was clearly intimidated with his boss' sudden fervour. "S-Supposedly, one of the Muggleborn n-noted the sudden disap-p-pearance of the Potters from all c-census data in 1991," he relayed. "W-When the r-records showed a-absolutely no reason for t-that, the Muggleborn s-suggested they ask for M-Muggle census d-data from t-that year. P-presumably because i-it reminded him of s-something o-out of a s-story he liked."

Sirius felt his stomach plummet. "And?" he pressed.

"They f-found that m-many n-new names were f-filed that y-year…but only a-about a dozen f-fitted the t-three person f-family profile," he stuttered out. "T-they've a-already ruled out t-ten of them."

The colour from Sirius' face drained as he realized the implications of where Watson was going. "Who are they interviewing now?" he asked desperately. He had to warn William. James. Lily. Isabella…hell Harry had to be told immediately, nevermind himself!

"A f-family called the P-Porters," Watson said in a small voice.

Sirius sighed in mild relief. At least they weren't onto the Whites already. Still, that left him precious little time to get the contingency plans in action.

"Good work, Watson," he praised nonetheless. After all, the man had done good by bringing this to his attention. "You can leave now. Try to act natural at the Ministry, and keep strictly to protocol from now on for at least the next month, understood?"

Watson nodded fervently. "O-Of course, sir!" he said fervently before shyly looking up. "Err…t-this…won't change what happens to…?"

"Your daughter's hospital bills will continue to be paid on time, Watson," Sirius assured him. "The Potters take care of their own, after all."

Watson bowed his head gratefully at Sirius. "Thank you, sir!" he thanked him sincerely. "Thank you for everything!"

Sirius nodded silently and made a gesture of dismissal, which Watson complied with without any fuss. Immediately, Sirius brought down the silencing ward and quickly brought out his cell-phone. Pressing on the number 1 for a second, he smiled as the device auto-dialled the pre-saved number. "Henry, it's me," he spoke into the device. "Yeah. It's that time. How quickly can you get here? Ten minutes? Make it five and I'll make sure you get bonus pay for this. Uh-huh…uh-huh…alright then, see you soon."

With a click, Sirius closed the cell phone and quickly got to work in dismantling the unlicensed Floo connection, thankful that he'd managed to get his hands on one of the Floo technicians' manuals for creating and dismantling one. By the time the doorbell rang, the job was done and Sirius was quick to get to the door.

After a short chat with Henry, Sirius left the loft and quickly sped away from the area, headed straight for Liverpool. On the way, he had his car dial the number for William. Once he heard the young man's voice speak up, Sirius began explaining the situation.

"William, we've got a big problem headed our way."

"Oh? Do tell."

"Cat's out of the bag," was all Sirius had to say, and immediately the line went dead. William had immediately understood.

Now to tell Harry.

Santander, Spain, March 28th, 2010 (D-Day +426)…

"What do you mean they're onto us?" Harry hissed into the secure phone he'd been led to by the military aide. "Muggleborn? What's that got to—fuck!" he swore as he came to the same conclusion as Sirius on the other side of the line. "Spy movies, huh? Never thought

someone would pull that on us. Did you get your body double in place? You did? Great, that's some good news, I guess."

Harry stared at the blank wall in front of him as he listened to Sirius talk before scowling. "No, I can't just disappear!" he snapped back. "We're on the freaking verge of the award ceremony! The Prime Minister himself is here! There's no way I could pull the switch in time!"

Harry's scowl deepened as he heard Sirius' protests. "I know damn well how serious this is, Sirius!" he hissed. "But I can't just excuse myself with a fucking tummy ache from this, now can I?" he glared at the wall. "I don't frankly give a fuck how dirty my language is—I think I've got a right to swear at this point, don't you?"

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose as he scrunched his eyes in deep thought. "Okay, okay, listen…" he said in a placating tone as his thoughts kept racing. "I'll go through the ceremony as planned, but the moment I get off stage, I pull the switch, okay?"

Harry opened his eyes and narrowed them just as quickly at Sirius' response. "Well, I'm sorry, princess, do you have a better idea at this point?" he asked scathingly. "Yes, I know it's reckless, and yes I know it's damned risky, but it's the best we're going to get at this point. Besides, I don't think they're dumb enough to try and pull something in front of international television cameras."

Harry leaned against the wall and nodded slightly as he heard Sirius reply. "Of course I'm sure. You just worry about your end," he suggested. "Out here, it'll be a hell of a lot more difficult to take me in without alerting the entire army, but you guys are practically in the open."

Harry nodded again. "Yeah, alright. Love you too, Sirius. Send my love to Ellie when you see her, and tell John to keep an eye on her. Alright…yeah…bye."

Sighing heavily, Harry put down the phone and left the isolated room, earning himself a slightly anxious look from Josefina as he met her outside.

"Is everything alright?" she asked, having noticed his extreme stress immediately.

Harry shrugged. "A little problem back home, nothing that can't be handled," he replied evenly. Josefina, of course, didn't buy it. Having been at his side since he rescued her, she'd been around him long enough to decode some of his more neutral phrases. "A little problem," for instance, typically meant a huge fuckup.

Still, it wasn't her place to say anything on that respect unless he brought it up himself, so she remained quiet as she followed him down the hall and towards the building entrance, where the official military jeep was waiting to bring him to the school where they would be performing the ceremony.

The ride itself was dominated by an almost oppressive silence as Harry brooded silently, the entire way. The driver, for his part, remained stoically quiet, as his job required, and Josefina alternated between looking out at the scenery and glancing at her guardian worriedly.

When they got to the school, Harry thanked the driver, who saluted primly and helped Josefina get out of the jeep, earning her thanks as well. Together, the duo quickly moved towards the medium-sized covered gymnasium, where most of the guests were apparently already there—probably only waiting for him and the PM's caravan.

Mingling among the brass and other soldiers who were due to be honoured at this award ceremony, Harry couldn't help the cold shiver that ran down his spine as the time of the ceremony's actual happening closed in. He knew he'd told Sirius that the odds of the mages trying to get him during the ceremony were small, but that did not make them nonexistent. There was a chance they'd be that brazen, but a bigger chance they wouldn't be. The question was, was he willing to take that bet, like he'd taken the equally ridiculous bets at Palencia and when fighting that sniper in Burgos?

Could his luck really hold that strong?

More importantly, could he afford it not to be?

When he saw the PM's caravan drive into the school's roundabout, he knew immediately that the choice had been made for him. He'd have to take the bet and let the dice roll as they did. There wasn't going to be any plans, any tricks he could pull at this point. It all

boiled down to lady luck and the hope that the mages were far more cautious than he gave them credit for.

Harry watched, almost as though it were a scene out of a news show, as the armoured car's door opened and a familiar man stepped out, his Prime Ministerial smile in full force as he waved at the awaiting crowd by the gymnasium doors, who greeted him with applause and a few cheers. So far, so good.

Even as the PM and the audience filtered into the gymnasium, Harry felt his hopes rise slightly, as the ceremony itself seemed to proceed without much fuss. The regular awards came first, of course—better to save the best for last and all that. There was polite clapping at each award presentation, and the Prime Minister gave an obviously rehearsed speech praising each award nominee for their bravery, dedication, and so on. When they'd finally finished the regular awards and were going to name him for the Victoria Cross, Harry's tenseness had visibly decreased, his mind set on the idea that the mages would not be so stupid as to interrupt the event.

How wrong he was.

When his name was called, Harry stood proudly and calmly walked over to the Prime Minister's place by the centre of the elevated stage, the cameras in the audience flashing and the news cameras filming. Dressed in immaculate dress uniform, Harry was the very picture of soldierly perfection, and he knew it—he had dressed for it, too. With a sincere smile, he raised his left hand to shake the Prime Minister's, and that's when he saw it, and his hopes were dashed.

Behind the camera crews at the very back, numerous, robed people began to appear soundlessly, all of them wearing crimson robes that Harry identified immediately. Ministry Aurors.

Fuck.

Harry understood their sudden appearance, as well. They had been specifically waiting for him to be called upon, to make sure they had their designated target. When they raised their wands, however, Harry couldn't help but feel a moment of incredulity before his instincts took over and he began pulling at the Prime Minister's hand, surprising the man as he did so, but just in time to avoid a spell to the Prime Minister's face. By the colour of it, a stunning spell.

Chaos erupted immediately.

Harry watched as the Aurors systematically shot some sort of spell at the broadcast cameras that seemed to fry them—thereby removing the potential revelation to the world of magic's existence. They then, to his utter shock, began firing into the crowd—mostly stunning spells, but there were a few vicious bludgeoning spells applied to those they seemed to feel threatened by. And with good reason.

The military men in the hall quickly drew service pistols and retaliated against the Aurors with all due ferocity, causing many of the mages to have to stop casting offensively and focus on defensive, anti-ballistic spells. By doing so, they effectively cut their offensive power by three quarters, as the shields could only take so much before someone else had to cast it while the initial caster put the shield back up.

Harry, for his part, had also drawn his pistol, but was standing guard over the Prime Minister, who seemed to have understood the severity of the situation and kept lying down on his stomach, hands over his head. The security contingent seemed to realize the futility of getting the Prime Minister off the stage, too, as the Aurors kept up a steady stream of fire against Harry, missing only by so much as he distracted their aim with gunfire.

It wasn't a tactic meant to succeed forever, however, and he knew it. Still, by the way the soldiers in the room were forcing the Aurors back, it seemed possible that he wouldn't have to defend himself magically. Just in case, however, he sent Josefina—who was now at the foot of the stage and looking up at him—a knowing nod, which she quickly returned before dashing towards the back of the stage.

In the meantime, however, the mages managed to surprise Harry yet again. Four more Aurors seemed to Apparate onto the stage, catching him by surprise only for a fraction of a second before his instincts had him aiming at the nearest one and firing three times—all chest hits. The Auror promptly crumpled to the ground; dead from too slow a reaction time.

The other two Aurors looked enraged by the death of their comrade, but the third one—the leader, he presumed, given her dispassionate stare towards him and her look of authority—kept her eyes on him.

"Francis White, née Harry James Potter," she spoke authoritatively. "You are hereby placed under arrest by the will of the Wizengamot and the Ministry of Magic for unlawful use of magic against Muggles, reckless endangerment of the Statute of Secrecy, and failure to register as a wizard. Come quietly and no one else needs to get hurt."

Harry ignored the small gasp from the Prime Minister as he levelled his own neutral stare at the woman. "You want me?" he asked dangerously, noting the arrival of Josefina at the short stairway leading to the stage. "Then come get me," he challenged, just as he saw Josefina thrust a bundled pack at him.

The move surprised the three remaining Aurors on the stage, and they quickly turned to stun Josefina, who quickly dodged the spells by jumping to the side. Harry, meanwhile, got up and easily caught the bundle. With a pull, he unravelled it and revealed two NCO 1840-patterned swords, each possessing a 1.5 inch wide straight blade. Cool confidence was all that remained on Harry's face as he stared down his attackers.

"It may have been a while since I've fenced in live combat," he noted casually. "So I hope you'll forgive me if I come across as a little rusty."

The Auror lead wasted no time and quickly moved to stun him, but Harry was too quick for her. Rather than aim for the leader, however, he struck at the two junior Aurors, blade in each hand. He wasn't so quick they couldn't follow him, of course, but the fact that they'd been distracted by Josefina's presence had thrown them off their game, which suited him just fine.

"Wilkins! Dawson! LOOK OUT!" he heard the woman yell as she caught onto his aim.

Harry struck at the two recovering Aurors like a viper, his swords quickly finding their targets and sinking into their torso's flesh, each of them piercing the Aurors' stomachs. At the very least, it surprised

them both and brought them to the ground, unused to the piercing pain.

Rather than let the blades rust in their victims' blood, however, Harry drew the swords out of their wounds and turned to face the female Auror. Quickly, he stepped aside as a vicious looking bludgeoning spell raced by where he'd been standing, and quickly brought his right-hand sword to a guard position, while his left hung down, its purpose, for now, accomplished.

"Murderer!" screamed the redheaded Auror, her powerful spells clearly denoting her substantial magical ability. With almost practiced ease, however, Harry parried each one with his right hand sword, much to the woman's shock.

"Goblin steel?" she yelled incredulously. "T-Those treacherous bastards!"

Harry grimaced internally, keeping a look of utter cool on the outside. He'd hoped that no one would make the connection between the goblins and his family, but this woman seemed to be familiar with the workings of magically resistant goblin-wrought steel. This made his silent vow not to use magic seem all the more hopeless now, as it meant the woman would probably also be familiar with the types of spell that even goblin steel couldn't parry.

Sure enough, the woman began to resort to elemental spells, sending jets of boiling water, electric bolts, and other such feats of elemental magic at him. Stabbing down onto the wooden stage with the swords, Harry abandoned them as he ran forward and slid underneath the spells, headed straight for the Prime Minister. The situation was getting quickly out of hand and if the woman upped her attacks just a little bit more, it could very well endanger the life of the leader of the British nation—which Harry could just not allow.

Thus, he aimed for a quick snatch and run of the man, but was forced to twist around and kick at the woman's outstretched hand as she readied to hit him in the back with what appeared to be a wind-based spell. Unfortunately, doing so caused her aim to rocket skyward and, more importantly, caused the spell to hit the roof.

Despite the situation, Harry was impressed to see that the woman's spell managed to not only crack the roof, but pierce right through it.

Unfortunately, it also meant that there were now huge chunks of concrete falling towards them. The woman, having slightly spun around due to the kick, had not yet noticed, leaving Harry as the only one who could save them, as running out of the way with the PM in hand was just physically impossible.

Silently thankful for the fact that the Aurors had taken out the broadcast cameras—the photographic cameras could be confiscated and censored more easily—Harry brought up his right hand at the ceiling and snapped his fingers once, to the great confusion of the female Auror, who was just now returning her attention to her prey.

Then, to everyone's surprise, a translucent dome appeared above the trio, apparently solid enough to withstand the falling chunks of concrete and deflect them away. Harry swore he heard a collective sigh of relief from the security detail, but over the constant gunfire, shouting, and miniature explosions, there was no real way to tell if he was just imagining things.

Regardless, the moment the chunks stopped falling, the woman returned her attention from the shield to Harry, only to find his right arm already outstretched and his fingers ready to snap.

"Come on," he goaded her with a scowl. "Just try me. With one snap, I could turn you into charcoal. Make a move and I swear that's what I'll do."

The woman glared. "This isn't over, Potter," she hissed. "We know who you are now. The moment the Ministry hears about this, we will come after you again."

Harry's scowl gave way to a calculating smirk. "Ah, but you see, unfortunately, you'll all be dead," he told her simply. "Yes, yes…it was truly tragic that this award ceremony, where you tried to press me for an interview, was suddenly attacked by the Spanish resistance, in which you were all caught in the crossfire and sadly died."

The way Harry had spoken, coolly and matter-of-factly, was truly chilling to hear. It was as though he was reciting the facts from a history book, rather than threatening the woman before him. He saw the woman twitch her wand.

"Apparation?" he asked amusedly. "Did you think I hadn't noticed that wards came up the moment you came in? Unless you bring them down, and that'll take enough time for me to burn you all to ash, you're not going anywhere."

To his horror, however, it was the woman's turn to smirk confidently.

"Shows what you know, Potter," she shot back, one hand quickly reaching into her robes. "PORTUS!" she yelled, before suddenly disappearing, just as Harry's frantic fire spell engulfed her now vacant position.

Across the room, the yell had been heard, and the remaining Aurors quickly did the same, vanishing into thin air after having reached into their robes.

The fighting was over.

Despite the fact that the Aurors had left empty handed and with two dead bodies to report, Harry couldn't help but feel that this was their win. He had been forced to reveal that he was indeed a wizard, and although he never truly confirmed he was Harry Potter, they would now have enough information to make the educated guess that he was.

"DAMNIT!" he raged as the fires from his spell dissipated and produced no charred body. He'd fucked up. Royally. Even if he earned the Prime Minister's gratitude for protecting him, Harry was now in the open with regards to the Ministry, and with him, his family. The only consolation, in his mind, was that the general public had not seen what had happened.

Unfortunately, Harry hadn't accounted for the newsmen at the back, whose cellular phones were hard at work in recording everything their fried cameras could not. Within a day, they would all be gleefully reporting back to their news stations with the greatest scoop of human history.

The existence of magic.

Post-AN: Yes, the fight at the end was short, but it was meant to be. The Aurors weren't there for a full-fledged battle, but a criminal

takedown-which obviously got botched. The fight's not the point, anyway, but rather what it represents.

With this chapter, however, we end the "Upbringing" arc of "Emperor." From here on out, Harry will have to face the consequences of his reappearance and manipulate them in his favour in order to resume his rise to power.

Also, if anyone's got a decent grasp on (at least) university-level economics, I'd be thankful if they could contact me so I can refine the whole economic angle discussed mid-chapter. I get the sinking feeling I'm very wrong there, so I'd like to pick someone's more capable mind to fix the arguments.

As always, please review and leave your comments. They do help me with fixing errors and addressing reader concerns.

Cheers,

- MB

Liverpool, United Kingdom, March 29th, 2010 (D-Day +427)…

Elicia opened the door with a curious look on her face, wondering who on earth would be knocking at her door around 8 o'clock in the evening—especially given that she'd only just gotten back from London. To her surprise, two people stood on her doorstep, one of whom had shockingly bright pink hair, making Elicia's lips quiver slightly as she restrained a full blown smile at the eccentric woman's appearance. Only the fact that they both wore police outfits and had a look of authority about them deterred her from showing such a facial expression.

"Can I help you?" she asked politely; no sense being rude, no matter how tired she was.

"Evening, ma'am," the woman greeted just as politely, her tone conveying the seriousness of her presence. "I'm Police Constable Tonks, and this here is my partner, Police Constable Longbottom; we'd like to ask you a few questions about a dangerous criminal currently on the run?"

Blinking owlishly at the fact that two policemen were coming to see her about what sounded to be an escape convict, Elicia nonetheless nodded and opened the door a little wider, letting the two apparent policemen into her home.

"Who exactly are you here about, Ms. Tonks?" she asked as the two police officers made their way to her living room. She quickly noticed that the male one, Longbottom she'd been told, was canvassing her apartment, as though he suspected her of hiding something.

The female police officer, on the other hand, seemed much more at ease and not quite as suspicious, settling for simply giving Elicia a polite smile and having a notepad out, pen ready at hand. "Ah, I never did quite say, did I?" Tonks noted apologetically. "The man we're looking for is called Francis White, ma'am. Have you heard of him?"

It took every ounce of self-control for Elicia not to immediately freak out and thus give herself away. Francis, or Harry as he had revealed himself to her, was no criminal, and she knew it. That meant that the

only people who would ever think of him as one would be those he and his family were running from—the Ministry of Magic.

"I knew a Francis White, yes," she answered carefully. "He and I attended Liverpool College when we were children."

She noted that Tonks seemed to write everything she was saying down, while the male policeman kept a steady stare on her—probably trying to see if she had any visual tells that would indicate she was lying. Thankfully, she was not—in the strictest sense of the word.

"Other people we've investigated seem to believe you and he had a relationship, Ms. Eisenheim?" inquired Tonks.

Elicia decided not to fib about that either. "We did. However, we broke up shortly after graduation," she clarified, allowing a small amount of genuine bitterness enter her tone. "We had…differences over our career paths and their consequences."

"Could you please clarify?" requested Tonks, suddenly very interested. Elicia noted that the other policeman seemed equally insistent.

"He wanted to join the Army, I tried to dissuade him," she explained simply, as though it were completely self-evident. "Lots of potential, he had—some of the best grades in recent Liverpool College history, in fact. Could've done anything in the world, but chose to become a professional murderer. I couldn't be around him after he made that choice. Not with a clear conscience."

The two police officers visibly deflated, as though they'd been expecting quite a different response. Nonetheless, Elicia noted that the male one kept a steady, suspicious look on her.

"I don't believe I understand what all this has to do with Francis being a criminal, however," she then pointed out innocently. "I mean, that was all in the past, and quite personal."

The two police officers exchanged a look before the woman spoke up once again. "Sorry, ma'am; just needed a bit of clarification as to his movements and motivations prior to his criminal acts. Gives us a better idea of his M.O., you understand."

Elicia nodded, giving the two police officers the acknowledgement they were no doubt seeking from her. She didn't want to think what they would do to her if she insisted they explain the reasoning behind their questions, being mages and all. Hell, she was pretty certain that if she called the Merseyside Police Authority, neither of them would show up on an official roster.

"One last question, then," the male officer spoke up then, surprising the two women. Apparently, the Tonks woman hadn't expected her junior partner to speak up at all. The subsequent glare confirmed this suspicion of Elicia's. "Have you been in contact with White at all since graduation?"

Elicia had a bad feeling that if she tried to lie about this, they would know. Something about that intense look the male officer was giving her was screaming at her not to lie. "I…have, yes," she admitted, and both officers perked up. "Well, but only before the war broke out," she hastily amended.

"Explain, please?" requested Tonks gently, obviously disagreeing with her partner's gruffer methods.

"Francis and I…what we had was quite intense," Elicia explained, blushing slightly at the fond memories. "So our breakup…it really tore each other up. We tried to keep in touch after graduation, and for the most part succeeded."

"…but?" insisted the male police officer, ignoring the reproachful look from his superior. Elicia began to wonder whether or not the authority dynamic between the two even truly existed.

"We got to talking one day, and it quickly became apparent that our differences were just too great to merely ignore or overcome," she stated. "We quickly realized we'd be one of those truly unhappy couples that stayed together mostly out of convenience and past memories rather than actual compatibility, so we parted ways for good. Sex, as I'm sure you know, can only heal so many rifts," she threw the last part in just to see the flushed faces of both supposed police officers, who did not disappoint. "Anyway, since then, I haven't seen Francis at all."

"Yes, well…" the male one stuttered out.

"What my oh-so-eloquent partner is probably trying to say is that he's sorry we've taken so much of your time, Ms. Eisenheim," the woman quickly spoke over him, at the same time reaching into her vest pocket and retrieving a calling card that she handed over to Elicia. "Please call us if you hear from White—his capture is of the utmost importance to public safety," she requested.

Elicia rather doubted that, but said nothing as she took the card and nodded. This was the right thing to do, apparently, as the woman smiled brightly at her. "Thank you for your time, then, Ms. Eisenheim," she thanked her politely. "We'll be getting out of your hair now. Longbottom, come," she snapped at her partner, obviously quite irritated with his performance.

The man flinched slightly at the reprimanding tone, which made Elicia feel a little warm and fuzzy inside, and quickly came to his partner's side as the two made their way out of the house. Elicia saw them off and exchanged polite goodbyes before closing her door, locking it, and then sliding down the frame to the floor. She let out a deep breath of relief, confident that neither "officer" had seen through her act. It helped that she had not, technically, lied to them. After all, the man she was seeing and was in love with now was not Francis White, but rather Harry Potter.

"Oh, Harry," she muttered to herself, her head in her hands. "What have you gotten yourself into this time?"

She practically jumped when the phone then suddenly rang, her nerves still on end from the harrowing visit from the police. Sure, she'd been the picture of calm during the interview, but that didn't say a damn thing about how worried she was for her lover's safety.

Quickly scrambling to her feet, she went for the phone and picked up the receiver, hoping to hear from Harry. She was immediately disappointed.

"Sirius?" she asked, surprised. What were the odds that two mages would visit her home and Sirius would call that same day? "Yes, I'm fine. I just got back from London. What? You're coming over as well? What happened?"

She waited quietly as she listened to Sirius explain what had happened in London and quickly made the connection between the police officers and the events described by Sirius. While she had guessed the two were mages, it had never really clicked in her mind as to why they would be seeking her out, or why they were asking for Francis White and not Harry Potter. "Sirius, I know. I think I got visited by two of them just now," she winced as she heard him shout in surprise.

"No, I did not tell them where he was!" she snapped right back upon hearing him ask that. "Who were they? Umm…a woman called Tonks and a man called Longbottom. What do you mean, Aurors? What the hell is that?" she demanded. "Special police? Wait, what do you mean, does my head hurt? Why would it…?"

Elicia blanched when she heard Sirius' explanation. "Mind reading?" she had to truly restrain herself from shrieking. "Sirius, I don't know where you are, but you better get your arse down here right this minute!" she demanded. "I want an explanation!...thirty minutes? Alright, then. See you then—and it better be a good explanation, Sirius!" she warned before putting down the receiver.

Once again, she felt weak in the legs as the weight of the revealed facts bore down on her. This time, however, she had the presence of mind to get to a chair sit down on it rather than go for the floor.

Santander, Spain, April 2nd, 2010 (D-Day +432)…

Harry always knew that eventually his apparent good luck would run out. It wasn't as though he'd planned out his entire life on the idea of his luck holding strong from beginning to end, but he'd been hoping—nay, praying—that it would hold out just long enough to get himself inextricably settled in the popular mindset as a hero before it would run out. That way, he had the people to fall back on, and they would keep lifting him up for his good deeds.

Of course, Murphy's Law demanded that things go awry for once, and it simply chose one of the worst moments of all to have his cover blown.

It wasn't the war he was worried about—no, if anything, that would work in his favour. After all, who wouldn't want a super-powered soldier running around the battlefield, causing massive destruction

on the enemy forces? No, what worried Harry was the fact that the entire thing, as he was now informed, had been caught on camera—phone cameras, of all things—and been transmitted essentially worldwide. The media had apparently decided to keep their footage a secret from both 10 Downing and the military, fearing (rightfully) government censorship of the captured images. Coupled with the Internet, there was now no way to clamp down on the leaked footage.

Which brought Harry to his current problem.

While the Prime Minister had been thankful for Harry's intervention—as it had probably saved the man's life—he had nonetheless been forced to place Harry under arrest due to pressure from Parliament and his own cabinet, in a desperate attempt at some measure of damage control. Harry imagined that the Minister of Magic probably had a lot to do with raising the shit-storm necessary for the PM to arrest him, too.

Regardless, it made Harry worried that his arrest would inevitably lead to his handing over to the Ministry of Magic. Now, ordinary offenders of the Statute of Secrecy typically got fined, with Azkaban sentences only ever happening if the breach was sufficiently severe to warrant imprisonment in hell on earth. For him, however, he imagined the Minister would easily pass legislation to have him executed for his consistent breach of the Statute. Hell, he wouldn't be surprised if the International Confederation of Wizards itself was clamouring for his head. After all, he had single-handedly brought down everything they'd worked for in the past three centuries or so.

Despite all these obstacles before him, however, Harry was comforted to know he had allies as well. The military, for one, refused to treat him as a criminal, since his use of magic in the battlefield had come about mainly out of their orders. Furthermore, the soldiers themselves who had served with him or seen his power had rallied behind him as a saviour of British lives. The rest were thankfully neutral, with very few actually being hostile to the revelation of his magical powers. Those that were hostile were kept away from his holding cell, lest anything untoward should happen.

That was a new thing for Harry, too—his cell. Long used to the military tents, however, he wasn't as concerned by the limited space, though he did find it dreadfully boring. Only a cot, a loo, and a

washbasin adorned his cell, and all of it well within view of the cell door, which didn't help his embarrassment whenever nature called. Thankfully, the guards outside would oblige him whenever he needed to use the loo and looked away.

That wasn't to say that he had nothing to do, of course. Every day since his incarceration, Josefina would come visit with news from his regiment and letters from supporters. The letters were, for the most part, rather generic. "You make us proud," "Thank you," "You're a credit to patriots everywhere," etc…

No, what interested Harry the most from these visits were the news Josefina brought with her regarding events back in the United Kingdom. Specifically, anything related to Sirius, William, John, and Elicia—his main core of supporters and loved ones in the UK.

Hearing the heavy metal door down the corridor open, Harry perked up from his place lying on the cot. Was it already visiting hours? Raising his legs, he shot them forward and used the momentum to sit up on the bed, being unable to do with his hands, as they were currently being held in a rather primitive stock-like contraption that, from the feel of it, was of mage construction. What tipped him off? The complete incapability he was currently experiencing in drawing his magic.

"White, you've got a visitor!" he heard one of the guards down the hallway bark out. Rather unnecessary, of course, as there were no other inmates at this particular complex. Hell, it couldn't even be considered a complex—it was a bombed out school, for goodness' sake. The cell, the door, the ass-backwards cuffs? All conjured by reluctant mages from the Ministry at the orders of the Prime Minister; who, word had it, was rather…displeased at the actions of the Aurors at the award ceremony.

Sighing in relief at the end of this particular stretch of boredom, Harry smiled over towards the cell door. "Well, it's about damn time, Josi—" he cut himself off as he saw the person at the cell door. It was not Josefina.

"We meet again, Potter."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the woman standing before his cell door. She was the Auror he'd duelled on the stage at the ceremony. By

default, that made her the woman who had ruined all his carefully designed plans. What on earth was she doing here? Had the Prime Minister caved in and handed him over? No…Harry quickly scratched that possibility off the list; there were other Aurors around, nor any member of the Military Police or even the Ministry of Defence to formally hand him over. This was, insanely enough, a social call, by all appearances.

"So we do," he answered guardedly. "Though I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

The redheaded woman stared him down as though he were a disgusting insect. It didn't surprise him—he did kill two of her colleagues before her very eyes, after all. "…Weasley," she eventually grated out. "Auror Captain Ginny Weasley."

Harry nodded in recognition. He knew very well what family she spoke of—Sirius often mentioned them whenever they talked. "Weasley. I've heard the name," he told her as much. "Rather renowned family, aren't you?"

The woman sniffed. "Deservedly so," she replied.

Harry couldn't help but nod. She was right, after all. "Oh, I agree," he concurred. "Your brother is also an Auror, is he not? Word has it, he helped take down the Carrow siblings."

The Auror's eyes narrowed. "I'm intrigued as to how you would know that information, Mr. Potter," she said dangerously.

Harry smirked right back, got to his feet, and walked towards the cell door, stopping just a foot off of the door. "I get the newspaper delivered," he lied outright, and he knew she knew he did just by the way her shoulder suddenly twitched. "Honestly, though, is it true he actually cheated on the Head of Litigation Affairs?" he asked meanly. "I mean, how stupid does one get? Cheating on a lawyer of all people?"

The flush spread across the pretty redhead's face told him he'd hit a sour point. "That's none of your business, Potter!" she snapped.

Harry chuckled. "I rather disagree," he replied easily. "It helps to know what I can use against my opponents, as I'm sure the Minister would want the very best attorney in his pay to litigate against me."

The redhead tried to grab at him through the cell bars but had her hand stopped by the magical field between each bar. It was a safety measure to ensure neither spell nor physical object could go through to either aid or harm the prisoner or guard. "Leave Hermione out of this!" she snapped.

Harry grinned and raised an eyebrow. "Hermione is it?" he practically purred. "I see, I see…the Auror responsible for my arrest and the head litigator are friends…or, from that protectiveness, should I say, best of friends?" he observed with an amused smile. "How amusing. I'll have to keep that in mind."

With that said, he turned from the cell bars and went towards his cot, once again sitting down on the rough mattress. "So, my amusement aside, what are you doing here, Auror Captain Weasley?" he asked, having said her title as mockingly as he could muster. "I mean, I know some girls love to visit criminals to get their jollies off, but you don't strike me as the type," he commented as he looked her up and down. "Though, if I'm wrong, I wouldn't mind a conjugal visit."

The blush that appeared on the woman's face made the comment worth if for Harry. Typically, he wouldn't have debased himself with making such…unbecoming statements, but he wasn't about to let go of an opportunity to raise his opponent's hackles.

"Pig!" she hissed at him, stepping away from the bars disgustedly. He chuckled in amusement. "For your information, I'm here to see what kind of man I failed to bring in," she told him. "I'm…disappointed," she said with a taunting smile.

Harry raised an eyebrow. Taunting him back? If it weren't for the fact that they were on opposing sides and would undoubtedly happily gut him at a moment's notice, he had no doubts he would've grown to like this woman. "Oh? I seem to remember taking you and your chums to school on that stage," he shot back with a smug smirk. "Quite slow for Aurors, weren't they?"

The woman seemed to realize that he was actively baiting her now and, to his disappointment, did not rise to the bait. "Why are you

using magic against Muggles?" she asked, suddenly switching the topic and adopting a far more professional attitude.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the non-sequitur but decided to indulge her. "Damn. Ruin my fun, why don't you?" he pouted before shrugging. "I was ordered to," he replied simply. "Isn't that what soldiers do?"

The woman glared at him. "And the thousands of victims who died from your spells?" she demanded.

Harry shrugged. "Unfortunate, but necessary. The thousands of lives I took? I saved as many or more in British lives. A fair trade-off, given that as a Briton, I should be concerned about my people's lives, not the enemy's."

"And the civilians among those you murdered?" she snapped. "What lives would they have taken?"

Harry glared at her, no longer amused by her self-righteousness. Standing up, he walked over to within a foot of the cell door and stared her down. "Do not preach to me about morality, girl," he hissed venomously. "Have you fought in this war? Have you seen the depths of human madness like we have? Did you have to watch as fellow soldiers went up in flames whenever some crazed madman decided to use a homemade pipe bomb to blow himself and his family up for his insane masters?"

He watched the woman cringe a little from his verbal attack and felt some measure of satisfaction from it. "I thought not," he said with a satisfied nod. "Worse you have to deal with? Dark curses, hundreds of death, and then the bastard gets taken down. Me? I deal in the thousands, girly. I snap my fingers? Entire blocks go up in flames. And for every block I incinerate? Thousands of my men are saved," he lectured her. "So if you're asking me, do I sleep well knowing what I've done? Damned straight I do."

Well, that was a bold-faced lie, but he wasn't about to tell her that.

The woman tried to keep up a glare, but apparently didn't have the heart for it as she settled for a disgruntled expression and crossing her arms over her chest. "You know, for a Potter, you sure as hell don't sound like one," she observed.

Harry snorted. "'Sound like a Potter?' What the hell is that supposed to mean? Did we have a particular way of talking we copyrighted that I wasn't told of?" he mocked.

She intensified her glare towards him. "Don't be a berk," she snapped. "I'm talking about the Potters who supposedly took down Voldemort!"

"Oh, him?" Harry said with a shrug. "Tosser got ambushed by my parents. That's about it."

The woman looked at him disbelievingly. "What?"

"They laid a trap for him," he clarified. "You know, set things up so he'd be taken down by surprise? I really can't explain the concept much more simply than that."

"I know what an ambush is, you idiot!" she snapped. "I meant what's this drivel about James and Lily Potter taking down the most powerful Dark Lord in modern history by ambushing him?"

Harry made a big show of realizing what she meant, then ruined the whole thing by shrugging casually. "Dad set up a lightning rune as a standing countermeasure. You know, one of those meant for nonlethal take-downs of groups of people? Turns out, though, the Dark Wanker himself decided to take mum, dad, and me down by himself; so when mum finally rejoined the fight, they activated the rune and lit him up like a Christmas tree. That's when we found out the delightfully lethal effects of a mass take-down rune on a single individual."

The woman's lower jaw had dropped an inch at his story. "But…runes?" she asked disbelievingly. "That's…so…backwards!"

Harry shrugged. "If you don't expect it, you won't look for it," he summed up plainly. "Kinda like how you all seem to have missed the fact that I was gallivanting around England for the better part of ten years before coming here and lighting up the Spanish countryside. Great detective work there, Miss Auror Captain. Real bang-up job."

The woman kept up her glare. "We had other pressing issues to deal with," she riposted acidly. "Contrary to what you seem to

believe, the Auror Office's world does not revolve around you, Potter."

Harry nodded with a knowing smirk. "No, it doesn't, does it?" he mused. "Probably has something to do with that rash of terrorist activities that's been hitting the Ministry, eh?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Your information is scarily accurate, Potter, and technically confidential," she noted. "I would love to know who your sources are."

He shrugged, confident that she wouldn't find a damn thing. "Like I said, I get the newspaper."

Silence descended between the two as the redheaded woman kept her unforgiving stare on him, while he shrugged it off and stared at the blank wall on the other side of his cell, amusing himself by thinking up of other ways to annoy her.

She broke the silence first, however. "Why are you doing this?"

Harry played dumb. "Doing what?" he asked, looking bored.

"Gallivanting around, showing off your magic for everyone to see!" she clarified heatedly.

Harry shrugged. "I'm bored," he deadpanned, obviously lying.

She glared. "If you're not going to tell me, then just say so!"

He shrugged again. He seemed to be doing that quite a lot these days. "Okay, I won't tell you," he indulged her with a bored look.

She glared some more, though she did finally back down after a minute of trying to mentally will him to tell her his reasoning. "Fine," she conceded grudgingly. "Doesn't matter. Either way, you'll be spilling your guts out to the world, once we get you on trial."

Harry looked indecently interested. "Oh? I'm getting a trial?" he asked with insincere relief. "I thought I might simply be getting tossed into Azkaban; you know, like you did with my godfather."

"Those were different times," the woman argued.

Harry scoffed openly. "And that's all you have to justify it?" he sneered. "Different times? No reason? No logic? Just the excuse of differing perspectives of a time no more than a couple of decades ago?"

The woman's stare hardened. "You make us sound like barbarians," she noted coldly. "But what of you? You use your magic—your innate gifts—to torch human beings incapable of defending themselves from it!"

Harry shrugged. "Back to that, are we?" he asked with a nasty smile. "Still trying to fish for a reason for my actions? Give up, little Auror," he said with a sneer. "My reasons are my own."

"You've fallen quite low for a man born into such a prominent family," she stated with obvious certainty. It was clear to Harry that she was planning on ending their conversation soon enough, but he refused to let her get the last word in.

"This?" he mocked. "This is but a hiccup. I will rise again," he promised with such certainty in his tone that made the woman visibly shiver. "And when I do, I swear to you, I will change the world forever."

The two once again descended into a tense silence as they matched stares. One, jade green and unfaltering. The other, chocolate brown and full of resolution, albeit marred with confusion.

For a moment, the woman seemed about ready to go for her wand, maybe as an act of futile authority over the man behind the bars who shook her so, or perhaps more as a gesture of self-assurance; as if she were trying to comfort herself that she was armed and he was not. It wasn't as comforting as she'd wished it was.

Harry broke the silence first, looking away from her and towards the door down the hall. "Guard, the young miss is done here, I think!" he shouted, turning his attention back to the redhead as he heard the hallway door clang as the locks were released. "Got what you wanted from this little chat, Miss Auror Captain?" he asked, the title once again rolling off his tongue with a mocking tone.

The redhead looked at the man before her and couldn't help but feel crushing disappointment as she attempted to reconcile the dishevelled, uniformed man with the fairy-tale version she'd been described to by her father when she was a child. In the bedtime stories, Harry Potter was an icon of the Light, as were his parents—all presumed deceased, of course. This man, on the other hand, was the real deal, and all she could glean from him had not been positive to his image.

Certainly, he was powerful and well spoken; he was even handsome—she could admit that much. However, hidden just beneath that superficial perfection, she could tell he was ruthless, driven, ambitious, and unbearably indifferent towards morality. He would, she believed with fierce certainty, willingly sacrifice anything he had to achieve his goals—which were unfortunately still quite shrouded in mystery.

It was disappointing, and not a little tragic.

Harry, for his part, had a completely different perspective on the whole exchange. Through his little chat, he had now acquired at least three names he would pass on to Sirius for enhanced surveillance: Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Ron Weasley. He wasn't particularly worried about the third, however—all he really wanted from that surveillance was additional dirt he could use against the first and second persons. From the Weasley woman's reaction, he could tell that her brother's betrayal of her close friend had stung deeply, and he wanted as much as possible to capitalize on that if he did see the inside of a courtroom and she was his opponent.

Of course, there was always the possibility that they would now appoint a different prosecutor against him, given that he had revealed his knowledge of her personal life woes. He doubted it, though; the wizards had little enough legal experts as it was to match him in wits, and if that had not been obvious before, the redhead's report would drive that home. They would need their best against him, and they knew it. Thus, even with his knowledge of her intimate affairs, Harry knew that they would appoint the Granger woman to see him declared Guilty.

Harry gave a grim smile as he sat on his cot. Not that such a verdict would ever happen, of course. All he really needed was an

opportunity to get out of his current imprisonment—something legitimate, however. Certainly, he could probably convince enough people to help him expedite a jailbreak, but that would do little good for his image in the short run—and he needed an unassailable reputation in the short run. He was at his peak right now, and he wasn't about to allow what happened to Dumbledore happen to him. He would not wither away in some school, jumping at every shadow that reminded him of his skills.

No, he would use them as best he could, for the greater good of his family, and his people.

All he needed was an opportunity.

And a plan.

Liverpool, United Kingdom, April 7th, 2010 (D-Day +437)…

It was not, upon reflection, the first time Elicia had seen Sirius so flustered.

Well, that wasn't quite the word for it. Sirius was beyond flustered at this point; rather, he seemed more on the edge of total panic. To be fair, however, she shared his anxiety almost to the same level, though she was remarkably more capable of restraining herself. Maybe it came with knowing Harry as well she did, or her unshakeable faith in her not-boyfriend. Whatever it was, however, it allowed her to take the news that Harry was now in a jail cell much better than Sirius had.

"This is a disaster!" Sirius kept ranting as he paced the living room of their safe house.

William, for his part, seemed unmoved by the older man's panic—something that intrigued Elicia quite a bit, considering this was the man's brother Sirius was talking about.

"It is not a disaster, Sirius," William calmly countered. "Merely a setback. One we can overcome."

"How do you figure?" asked the weary voice of John as he stepped into view, having come down the stairs from having tucked in his

pregnant—and very distressed—fiancée. "Sorry, Will, but I really can't see how this could possibly get any worse."

Silently, Elicia made a prayer to Murphy, instinctively countering that obvious provocation towards fate's harsher side. It was something she'd picked up after a few times trying to experiment with the fuel crystals.

William, however, neither noticed her lack of attention, nor seemed fazed by the overwhelming pessimism permeating the room. "Harry is in jail, I acknowledge this and its unfortunate repercussions on our lives," he conceded. "However, we all know my brother. Even jailed, he will undoubtedly not be without a plan of some sort to turn this situation around. What we have to do now is not panic, but regroup," he told them sternly. "We are not, after all, without our own resources. Once the mages vacate Liverpool, we can begin our work again."

Elicia and John, however, were woefully uninformed. Harry had probably thought it a way to keep them from the most dangerous parts of his plan, but that consideration was now rearing its head at a most inconvenient time.

"What resources?" asked Elicia, interested.

"Mages, mostly," Sirius said without second thought. He knew his godson trusted the two magic-less individuals with his life and that of his family, so he felt little compunctions to hold anything back. "Maybe a hundred or so under the family's command."

John blinked. "What, you mean like sleeper agents?" he asked, trying to make sense of this new information.

William shook his head. "We have a couple of spies, but no sleeper agents," he corrected. "But no, what Sirius meant is we have about a hundred active mages waiting for orders in Europe."

"That's…not a lot," Elicia commented dully.

Sirius snorted. "If you'd seen what Harry can do by himself, you wouldn't say that," he commented amusedly. "A hundred mages could together, with the appropriate training, level a city in one go."

John paled. "And these mages have had this training?" he asked softly, horror clear in his voice.

William nodded mechanically. His dark chocolate eyes were trained on his brother's two closest, non-familial loved ones. It wasn't that he didn't trust them—if his brother did, then so did he, and he had the additional bonus of having grown up around them. Rather, it was that he was questioning how long their dedication to his brother's plans would run. Elicia, he suspected would follow his brother to the very ends of time, if need be. John, however, had much to lose from his involvement, and one of those things was sleeping upstairs, carrying the man's first child.

He frowned a little, though no one else in the room perceived the facial shift. This was one of those moments where William lamented the fact that he simply could not understand the emotional value that people placed in relationships and the like. Had he been born without empathy, he constantly wondered, to warrant his utter lack of understanding regarding human emotional relations? His own dedication to his brother was not out of filial love—in fact, there were times when he questioned his own ability to feel any such thing—but rather out of logical understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of the achievement of his brother's vision. He understood and, on a rational level, completely agreed.

There were advantages to his inability to feel empathy, however. Whenever a situation such as this arose, he was always the one with the cool head. His brother always knew to go to him if he needed clear-headed advice, free of emotional bias. That served to console him, somewhat.

"When the military brass found out about Harry, he made a compromise with them," William explained. "He would become their first ever military mage in exchange for their silence about his real identity. However, we all knew that it would be a matter of time before the brass demanded for more, so Harry asked Sirius to smuggle out any discontented mage out of Britain and the surrounding countries to our private training camps."

"And they all agreed to become soldiers?" asked Elicia dubiously. Certainly, a couple here and there among the exiles, she could understand—but each one until they numbered a hundred? Those were fairly skewed statistics.

William shook his head once. "No, of course not; just a few. The vast majority decline the offer for military training and instead work as either ambassadors to other countries, offering other discontented mages the same opportunity they had, or go back to work as moles for us. Very, very few ever outright demand total independence; those, we Obliviate of any knowledge of us and release into the wild. Keeps the Aurors busy, and our own identities safe."

"How many do we have?" asked John, and William's eyes tightened imperceptibly as he noted the man's use of a collective pronoun, indicating some form of tacit agreement to stay on with the plan. "Of these military mages, I mean."

"A little over two hundred, though only one hundred are field ready." William answered levelly. "Weeded out for the past decade or so, and trained for the past five. There's a good dozen of them on Harry's level of wandless magic, but most of them are wand users."

John nodded thoughtfully, allowing Elicia to delve in next. "What's the plan, then?" she asked, simultaneously anxious and curious. "How do we go from here?"

"We cannot spring my brother out from jail, if that's what you're hoping," William stated flatly. "I suspect that even if we were to try, he would not accede to the plan."

"Why not?" asked John, somewhat perplexed.

"Image," Sirius took over for William, knowing of the youth's difficulty with tact. "More specifically, his public image. If he escapes, it's a tacit admission of guilt. If he stays and fights out the sentence procedurally, he shows himself confident of his moral and ethical righteousness."

"This isn't the moment to be concerned about one's public image!" John protested heatedly. "We've all got our necks out on the chopper's block, right now! He has to get out and fix this situation!"

"I disagree," William countered calmly. "This is the exact moment to care about image. Sirius?" he nodded to the dark-haired older man, who nodded back and turned his grey eyes to the uninformed duo.

"Word from my contact, in whose home we are now staying, has it that the press in the magical world has gotten word of Harry's arrest, as well as more…sensitive materials regarding the Ministry's investigation of the Potters' disappearance," he relayed. "Apparently, it's set off quite the public relations nightmare for the Ministry, and there have been a great deal of Muggle baiting incidents and Anti-Muggle rioting occurring. Apparently, the magocentrists are putting the blame of Harry's supposed 'defection' to the Muggles on the Muggles themselves."

"What's that got to do with Harry's need for good public image, though?' asked John, not seeing where Sirius was going.

Elicia did, however. "I get it," she said immediately thereafter, tapping her open palm with a closed fist in a show of realization. "If Harry escapes jail, he gets accused of showing total disregard for the Muggle laws, and thus public opinion will never fall his way, even if he later redeems himself. But if he stays in jail and acts like an indignant soldier getting jailed unfairly, he shows himself loyal and mindful of the rule of law, thereby rallying support for him!"

William nodded, silently pleased with his brother's choice of mate. Elicia had a good head on her shoulders, and William could not ask for more in the woman his brother chose. "Precisely," he confirmed.

"It's not that simple, though," Sirius cut in. "The public could just as easily get swayed to his side later on, if he proved his innocence on the run—fighting injustice goes a long way with the masses," he reminded the trio. "No, the main reason is that it also keeps the Ministry in check. As long as he's in official British custody, they can't touch him until he gets officially transferred to the authority of the Ministry of Magic."

William frowned; he hadn't thought of that. It made sense, however. "If that's true, then any legal delaying tactics we can pull would elongate the amount of time he's kept out of Ministry hands," he mused out loud. "That means more time to plan for a way to legally extract him from his current circumstances."

Sirius nodded in agreement as he poured himself a glass of scotch. "Already being done," he assured the group. "A few people in the Home Office and the Civil Service owe me a few favours, and I've

called them in. His processing should be suitably mangled up in red tape for a while."

Elicia maintained a concerned look on her face, despite Sirius' assurances. "How long are we talking here?" she pressed. "A month? Half a year?"

Sirius shook his head. "They can delay, my dear, but only so much, under normal circumstances. Under these circumstances? With the Ministry on top of the Home Office for Harry's transfer? We'll be lucky to get a week."

"That's not a lot of time," John observed grimly.

"Obviously so," William panned. "Meaning the more time we panic, the less of this very precious time we have to plan for Harry's extraction."

William was pleased to see that the group seemed suitably chastened by his reminder. Clasping his hands in front of him, he looked at each of the gathered people in the room and nodded at them. "Right then; let's get to work."

Santander, Spain, April 14th, 2010 (D-Day +444)…

"You must truly be some sort of glutton for punishment, Miss Weasley," Harry observed nonchalantly as he watched the redhead in question sit on a stool on the other side of his prison bars.

"How do you figure?" she asked right back.

"You keep coming here."

"Maybe I find you intriguing," she posed, but that was quickly shot down by Harry's head shaking.

"Animals in a zoo are intriguing," he countered simply. "The laws of physics are intriguing. Me? I suspect you keep coming here to see the prey you just weren't good enough to catch."

She glanced at the bars before her. "You seem caught enough."

His smile wasn't very nice. "Because my good friend the Prime Minister had to follow the law, not because you brought me in," he reminded her. "After all, I'd probably already be dead if you'd managed to catch me. Wizengamot isn't feeling too forgiving these days, I hear."

She leaned her chin onto a fist, using her other hand to tap her crossed thigh idly. "Yet more information you really shouldn't have access to, Mister Potter," she observed, obviously quite interested. "I would kill to know who our leak is."

Harry raised his left hand and gave her the two-fingered salute from his bed as an answer.

Her answer to that was to smile cheekily. "In your dreams, Potter."

"Oh, believe me, you do in my dreams," he replied quite smugly. "Most times, you even beg for more."

"Dreams do tend to exaggerate," she panned. "I mean, the fact that you think you could even satisfy a woman—let alone me—is already proof of that."

Harry chuckled. "Ouch," he replied good-naturedly. He was always fond of a good riposte. "So then, why are you here, Miss Weasley?"

"I still want to know why you're here," she replied calmly. "Why you do what you do."

Harry snorted. "Those are questions I'd expect from the military psychiatrist, not a Dark Wizard catcher," he jibed.

"Most of my colleagues do think I'm off my rocker," she confirmed with a sly smile. "Seem to think that my coming to see you is a waste of time."

"You'll forgive me if I agree with them, then," Harry said wryly.

"Oh?" she mused archly. "Because I rather believe that if I can understand you, I can find you a way out of your current predicament."

Harry quickly got to a seating position on his cot, his eyes sharp and fixed on the redhead's face. "What?" he demanded.

Said woman smiled a little smugly. "I may have a way out for you," she said plainly. "However, it does have conditions."

Harry's expression was a mixture of interest and scepticism. "Who exactly is offering this to me?" he asked carefully.

"I am," she stated.

Harry openly scoffed. "Please, my dear; you may be an Auror Captain, but you don't have the clout nor the legal power to clear me of all charges," he reminded her. "Now, I ask again: who is offering me this?"

The redheaded Auror looked at him for a moment before finally relenting. "Dumbledore," she ground out, clearly upset at having been called on her bluff successfully.

Harry's reply was immediate and decisive. "Not interested," he panned before returning to his prone position on his bed.

The woman blinked from the sudden answer, only processing Harry's response a few seconds after he'd given it. "What? Why?" she demanded, standing up.

"Dumbledore is a pacifist," Harry stated. "I hate pacifists. End of discussion."

"He's Supreme Mugwump!" she protested. "He could have all charges dismissed!"

"No he can't," he refuted. "Supreme Mugwump or not, he has to bow before public demand on this. The Minister wants me dead, the ICW wants me dead…hell, most common wizards and witches want me dead. Clearing me of all charges would be political suicide."

Ginny blinked; clearly, she hadn't thought about that. "Then why would he tell me to offer this to you?" she asked, confused.

"A gimmick, most likely," he hypothesized, though he was quickly seeing an opportunity to incite some inter-Wizard discord. "However,

I would expect that he's probably got a plan to break me out of jail and use me as some sort of icon. Hell, he might even try to 'rehabilitate' me," he added, using air quotes to show what he thought of that.

"Would that really be so bad?" she asked, leaning forward. "You could do a lot of good on our side." Her words sounded genuine enough, but Harry could see the doubt in her eyes grow a little.

"That's quite forgiving of you, Miss Weasley, considering I skewered two of your men not long ago," he noted with a raised eyebrow.

"Hating you won't bring them back," she stated tightly.

"Forgiving me is tacit approval," Harry shot back, enjoying the inner turmoil he was seeing in her gaze. "After all, if Dumbledore sprung me out, who's to say how many more of their kind I'd get away with killing? I'm a very deadly man, after all."

"You'd be rehabilitated," she pointed out.

"People lie about changing their ways all the time," he riposted.

The two descended into silence once again, only interrupted when the sound of the heavy steel door being unbarred reached their ears. Ginny turned her eyes away from Harry for a second to glance at the opening door before looking back at him, looking somewhat regretful, and standing up.

"I guess visiting time's over," she said.

Harry waited for a moment before giving her a knowing smile. "I think visiting in general is over," he corrected.

"Wha—?"

She was quickly interrupted by hurried footsteps that quickly cleared the distance between the door and the cell. Practically jostling Ginny aside was Josefina, looking a little harried, but none the worse for wear.

"They have a time," she stated simply.

Harry nodded calmly. "When?"

"Two days from now," Josefina informed him. "Heavy guard, airplane transport to Heathrow, from where they'll take you to the Ministry for custody turnover," she added, sounding greatly pained at the last part.

Harry looked over to the stunned redhead and gave her a smile. "You see?" he said. "Time, I'm afraid, is quite up."

As if to reinforce this point, two guards came up to the Auror and clasped hands on her shoulders, one of them politely, if forcefully, requesting her to leave the premises. Silently giving Harry another glance, she nodded and acquiesced their request, quietly seeing herself out, leaving Harry with the guards and Josefina.

Two days later, the travel from Spain to the UK began for Harry. Unfortunately for him, it was dreadfully dull. The entire time, he'd been in the horrible anti-Magic cuffs the Ministry had forged especially for him, and his guards—typically friendly and sympathetic to his plight—had been replaced by either officious guards from Whitehall, or hostile wizards from the Ministry of Magic, who wanted to make absolutely sure that he would not escape during transit.

It was all really unnecessary, of course, considering that his ability to use magic was essentially reduced to nil from the damned cuffs. There was also the additional factor that he did not want to break out.

The only positive of the trip—more or less—was that Auror Captain Ginny Weasley had been assigned to be his personal escort. Josefina, for her part, had been refused passage on the plane—due to her close personal allegiance to him—and would be following on another flight—ostensibly to be a character witness in the trial they kept saying he was going to get. Harry still doubted any such thing would happen.

But back to the redheaded Auror; she was currently sequestered at his side on a rather uncomfortable steel bench within the belly of the plane, with big, burly, angry looking men at either side. A single look from Ginny was enough to get them to stop glaring at Harry, however, which he appreciated enough to restrain himself from overtly mocking her and the guards.

The comfortable silence, unfortunately, was broken by said redhead.

"There have been disturbing reports about your transfer," she told him quietly, not even turning to look at him.

Harry debated whether or not to humour her as he remained in his relaxed sitting position, head leaning back against the plane hull. His curious side won out. "How so?" he asked.

"Some people I trust seem to think that the Death Eaters might be making a play for you when we get to London," she warned him seriously. Normally, this wouldn't warrant a single iota of attention from Harry, but the tone with which she delivered the warning told him that this was more than a supposition—it was a certainty.

"Do your colleagues know?" he asked simply.

"Of course they do," she replied dismissively.

"Then why tell me?" he followed up.

"Call it an act of human decency," she told him before descending into silence once again.

"I doubt your colleagues will appreciate giving me a heads-up," he observed quietly. "But thanks anyway."

"Doesn't mean I forgive you for Wilkins and Dawson, though," she stated forcefully.

Harry smiled to himself. "Wouldn't dream of it," he whispered back. Silently, though, he was almost gleeful that he'd gotten her out of the forgiving mindset. It would undoubtedly cause Dumbledore quite a few problems in the future.

London, United Kingdom, That Same Day…

From one bad cliché to another.

This was the opinion Harry had of the whole transit procedure destined to get him to the Ministry of Magic's offices in London. The airplane ride had been predictably dull and full of uncomfortable

seats, hostile glares from the guards, and the occasional ribbing at their expense. Then, at the airport, he'd been frisked so much he had jibed about worrying about his virtue, causing one of the Wizard guards to move to strike him, only to be restrained by some of the Muggle guards. The worst part, in his opinion, was the fact that he was now being transported to the Ministry's offices in a large black police van. Considering the fact that it had a massive escort all around it, Harry was pretty sure the only way the transfer plan could be worse would have been if they had painted a massive bull's eye on it with his name at the centre.

Quite frankly, if those Death Eaters Ginny had told him about didn't manage to guess where he was, he was going to be quite disappointed. Especially since he was kind of counting on them.

Glancing to the side, he saw Ginny sitting rather stiffly in her seat.

"Nervous?" he asked mockingly.

"We're transferring one of the most dangerous and most detested criminals of the Wizarding World in plain daylight," she shot back. "Of course I'm nervous!"

"Sorry, I'll try not to get caught next time," he promised.

She flashed him the two-finger salute in response, causing him to grin.

"Anytime, baby," he leered.

Whatever reply she had on her lips, however, was quickly cut off as the van suddenly jolted violently to the side, causing the redhead to hit her head on the glass window hard and sprawling Harry on the seat.

Thankfully, the sudden move hadn't managed to knock him out, though it did leave him dazed. His hearing was crapping out, too, given the dulled out way he was hearing things. Slowly, though, he was recuperating his senses, and an attempt to check out the condition of the driver and the front guard told him the two had been killed by the crash. A glance at his side told him his personal escort was knocked out, at the very least, though she would undoubtedly

die if she wasn't rushed to a hospital right away.

Unfortunately for her, however, Harry was more concerned with getting himself out of his current predicament. The van was, thankfully, not on its side or upside down. Instead, it had crashed violently against the brick wall of a nearby building, a little crushed but otherwise none the worse for wear.

Reaching for the door handle, he pulled numerous times to open the door and quickly found his expectations dashed as the regulation safety locks held firm, disallowing him from opening the rear doors from the inside. Normally, this would call for some technical improvisation—probably ending with him exiting the car with the door's mechanism fairly intact. This time, however, he had little time to waste.

Thus, lying on his back, head practically on Ginny's lap, he raised his legs, pulled them up to his chest, and then slammed his feet against the recalcitrant door with all his might. Predictably, his first attempt was a bust. His second, however, loosened it a bit, and his third finally broke the locks and forced the door open.

Almost immediately, a part of him wished he were back in the car, which despite the accident, was still nonetheless relatively safe from the situation outside.

As Ginny had informed him, the Death Eaters had indeed launched a raid on his caravan, undoubtedly aiming to end his life and claim the fame of ridding the Magical World of its worst offender of recent time for themselves and their cause. Thus, the sight Harry was privy to upon leaving the relative safety of the van was one of his Muggle and Wizard guards fighting the Death Eaters, who were currently in possession of the higher ground by way of rooftops. The entire street was essentially a killing ground at the moment,, and the sight of numerous bodies on the ground told him the situation was getting worse by the second.

Not that Harry could worry about the body count just yet, however. After all, he still had those damned cuffs on, and until they were off, he was essentially useless in this fight.

Which was the precise reason for which he immediately sought out the nearest guard, which turned out to be a Muggle Corporal who was cowering behind an overturned car.

Sliding into position next to the Corporal, Harry gave the young man a dazzling smile.

"Hi there!" he greeted the man joyfully, as though he was not part of the current fighting. "I'm Harry. I've got a problem, and I'm fairly sure you could help me. You see, I've got these pesky cuffs on," Harry raised his hands, which were still held down by the magical, wooden stocks. "And with them on, I can't use my magic; magic, by the by, that could save your life at the moment. So, how about you be a dear and let me out of these things?"

The frightened Corporal seemed to forget his fear for a moment as he watched Harry deliver the entire mini-speech with a completely straight face and a cheerful grin. The man's first instinct seemed to be ignore Harry, but something must have clicked in his mind, because when he turned back to face him, the Corporal's face had paled considerably and his rifle was now aimed at Harry's heart.

"You're that Potter guy we're supposed to escort!" he accused wildly.

Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. "Yes, I'm he," he confirmed. "Now that the obvious has been taken care of in this wonderfully intellectual exchange, how about you let me out of these so I can help fry those masked sons of bitches?"

The man's head shook wildly in the negative. "You're evil!" he screamed, half in fright, half in an attempt at macho bravado. He even jutted his assault rifle in Harry's direction, poking the raven-haired man in the shoulder roughly in the process. "We're going to be taking you to get what's coming to you!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the love of…" he didn't finish his sentence, however, having caught a flash of green at the corner of his eye. Quickly, he threw himself onto the Corporal, managing to prevent the man from getting hit by a Killing Curse.

"Happy now!" Harry shouted down at him before rolling off and leaning against the overturned car in a seated position. "I'm not out to kill you, or any other normal person. I'm just a British soldier, like

you," he insisted. "And as it stands, this fight isn't looking good. Now, I get that your job is to keep me from escaping, but guess what? I don't want to escape."

The man looked at him blankly, still getting up from Harry's impromptu tackle. "You don't?"

Harry shook his head. "I want to help," he insisted. "Look, if the other mages could finish this situation quickly, they would have, right? That means they're losing control, and I can help our side regain that control," he pressed, raising his shackled hands. "Free my hands, and I promise I'll willingly put them back on when I'm done."

The Corporal looked at him uncertainly. "Why should I trust your word?" he demanded.

Harry shrugged. "Because otherwise, you'd be dead from that Killing Curse that I saved you from. If I didn't want to help you out, I'd have waited for the bastards to kill you and looted your body for the key."

Harry had to repress a sigh of relief as he saw (reluctant) concession in the soldier's eyes. Frankly, he'd been worried he would have to allow the Death Eaters to kill the young man in order to get the damn key, but it seemed he'd gotten through.

Hesitantly, the Corporal dug out a dull, unassuming silver key from his pocket and held it up, his eyes on the cuffs. From the look in his eyes, Harry guessed he was having second thoughts, which was taking up precious time.

The man looked up to meet Harry's eyes. "Your word of honour you'll put them back on afterwards?" he asked, quite a lot of fear coming through his tone.

Harry nodded, lifting his antiquated cuffs up for easier key access. "My word of honour," he agreed.

The Corporal was silent for a moment before nodding and inserting the key into the keyhole and turning it, causing both men to hear a soft click ring out, just before the miniature stocks loosened up and, with a flick of his wrists, fell off of Harry's person. Almost instantly, he felt his magic pour through his body like a raging river, as though a great dam had been removed from its path. His neck muscles

tensed up from the experience, causing him to look upward, his eyes scrunched shut from the indescribable experience.

Then, when it was over, he lowered his head and opened his eyes, feeling whole again with his magic once more at his beck and call. His eyes fell on the frightened Corporal, who looked like he was already regretting his decision.

"Thanks," was all Harry said before turning to face the more immediate problem of the rooftop Death Eaters.

"Remember your promise!" the soldier cried out suddenly.

Harry didn't even bother to look back. "Of course."

Then, lifting his right hand, he curled his hand as though to make a fist and got his fingers ready for a snap, their target a Death Eater raining death on soldiers at the foot of the building. He spared a glance at the Corporal behind him and saw the man looking away, cowering.

"Man up, Corporal," he reprimanded the man. "Don't look away when it gets tough. Look straight ahead and maybe you'll see something wonderful."

Then, without further warning, Harry snapped his fingers.

And the world lit on fire.

Liverpool, United Kingdom, April 17th, 2010 (D-Day +447)…

"Yes, I know the Ministry's up in arms, Clyde!" Sirius was shouting into the mouthpiece of his phone. "I don't rightly care if there are protocols in place! You know the deal! You hear something about Harry, you tell me, and in return, your family gets a supplemental wage so they never have to find out about that little problem of yours, or have you forgotten?"

Elicia winced at the man's heated voice; despite the fact that Sirius was actually moving throughout the house, the sound level of his shouting seemed constant anywhere they were, no matter where he was. "Isn't that kind of a low blow?" she asked William, whom she

knew would probably be the most impartial person in the entire household.

William shrugged. "From one perspective, probably," he conceded. "However, the Ministry is keeping a tighter lid than usual on the information about what happened during the transit, so he's also a little frustrated about how little we know about Harry's current situation."

"What about 10 Downing Street?" she followed up, sighing in resignation as she watched William knock her Queen to its side, finally putting her in checkmate.

"For now, they seem to agree with the Ministry's stance of operational silence," William analyzed. "Though I doubt they are doing so out of voluntary decision-making. The Prime Minister probably wants Harry back on the battlefield as much as the military does," he mused. "Checkmate, by the way."

Elicia ignored the board in front of her—it was simply a way to pass the time in the safe house. "Why's that?"

"He's the most inexpensive super-weapon the government has, of course," William explained. "Think about it: all they pay him is a soldier's wage, and in return they get flattened city blocks. It's probably every military accountant's wet dream."

"Isn't that just exploitation?"

William gave her a neutral smile. "It would be, if my brother was locked in a vicious cycle of destruction for pay that he could not feasibly extricate himself from," he agreed. "However, if his seemingly exploitative service under the military was part of his original plan, leading in turn to greater, future profits…"

"…then it's not exploitation," Elicia finished for him, sighing in resignation as she conceded defeat in this argument. She would never understand how the Potter siblings seemed to be so…cold and calculating about life. Hell, she had been ambivalent towards most social functions when she was young, but at the very least she did some things for fun or because it gave her a sense of immediate accomplishment, not just because it would help her in the distant future.

"Oi, lads!" they heard John shout from the living room, where he'd nested himself on the couch and stuck to the television. "Get in here, quick!"

Almost immediately, the trio (even Sirius, who had apparently finished haranguing the man over the phone) went to the living room, finding John with his arm comfortingly around his pregnant fiancée's shoulders. "News from London," he told them the moment they entered his line of sight.

"…and now, breaking news from the situation in London, where a fierce fire fight of till now unheard of proportions broke out yesterday between elements of the British Government, the recently revealed Ministry of Magic, and the terrorist cell now known as the Death Eaters…" the anchorman could be heard saying. "According to our sources, reports coming out from the Metropolitan Police headquarters at New Scotland Yard indicate that the preliminary number of casualties in yesterday's tragic events could number about two dozen dead, with at least twenty wounded. Unfortunately, we have been unable to acquire any form of confirmation from the Commissioner himself, but our reporters have finally been allowed to move closer towards ground zero. Agatha Marshall is on the scene now; Agatha?"

The group watched in silence as the image shifted from the BBC's news studio to what could have easily passed off as an image from the Anglo-Spanish War. While the devastation was not as thorough as it was on the Iberian Peninsula, the damage caused by magic and bullets alike were grimly obvious to anyone watching. Most, if not all of the convoy cars seemed broken beyond repair, with one seemingly buried halfway through a wall. A building near the closest destroyed vehicle had a good chunk of its rooftop blown apart, with the dangling limb of a presumed body hanging from the edge. Many more bodies—these covered by white tarps—littered the road behind the reporter, and if one looked carefully enough, one would be able to see the faces of horrified people looking from the building windows, where they had been confined to quarters under orders from the military police, which had secured the area.

At the forefront of the projected scene, of course, was the reporter from the BBC, looking pale and ill, undoubtedly from the stench of decay permeating from the grizzly scene behind her.

"T-Thank you, David," she started off weakly, as though trying to restrain herself from vomiting. "A-As you can see, the scene here on Hammersmith and Wolverton is ghastly to behold. Just yesterday, elements of the Royal Army, accompanied by a detachment of what we have been informed were Aurors, or Dark Wizard Catchers, from the Ministry of Magic were attacked by what Downing Street has publicly revealed to be a rogue mage terrorist cell, leading to the spectacular fire fight that has everyone in the near vicinity terrified."

The scene shifted again to show more of the clean-up effort being conducted by the military. The yellow cordon keeping people out of the engagement area was quite visible, as were the military policemen who stood guard behind it. Behind them, Army medics were apparently being put to task as they sped from one body to another, jotting down notes at some, crying out for assistance at another, and some just putting a white tarp over the body. The scene then split, leaving half the television screen showing the BBC newsreader and half showing the on-site reporter.

"Has any explanation been given for this attack?" the anchorman asked.

"Unfortunately not. All that has been released at this point is that the Ministry of Magic and the Royal Army had been transporting something very valuable when the attack happened," the reporter answered, still looking quite pale, but otherwise in full control of her stomach. "Speculation exists, of course, that the thing in question was in actuality the man seen protecting the Prime Minister in Spain, one Harry Potter, also known as Lieutenant Colonel Francis White of the 75th Regiment of Foot, deployed from Liverpool."

As she spoke, a silenced video of the scene in question was played on the telly, interspaced with live commentary from both the reporter and the newsreader, making William grimace as he watched his brother blow his cover spectacularly.

"Didn't that girl of his tell us they blew the cameras?" asked John as he watched the scene unfold on the television screen. "How did they get this footage in the first place?"

William lifted a finger to point at the screen. "See how the footage is a grainy and shaking? That's a cell phone camera recording."

"Harry must've forgotten," mused Elicia.

"I don't blame him," Sirius said darkly, before pointing at a particular figure fighting against Harry. "See the redhead fighting him? That's Ginny Weasley, if I'm not mistaken. She's a damn good Auror, even if she isn't one of the Ministry's best. The fact that she was there to take him down means the Ministry wasn't screwing around."

"Why not send their best?" asked Ana, John's fiancée, worriedly.

"They've got other problems," was all Sirius offered up.

Their attention quickly returned to the newsreel as it returned to the news studio.

"A tragedy to be sure," the newsreader was saying. "Unfortunately, with little information coming from the government and the area soundly closed off to our reporters, we are at this time unable to offer up a full account of what exactly happened there last night. In other news, tensions are rising to dangerous heights in the Balkans, as Yugoslav troops move to quell mounting discontent of Albanian nationals in Kosovo on the eve of the twelfth anniversary of leading Albanian moderate Ibrahim Rugova's death at the hands of the Yugoslav government, which succeeded in temporarily…"

Any further news was promptly shut off by William as he pressed down on the remote control, leaving the room in silence.

"So, nothing new…" John noted.

William shook his head, having adopted his usual thinking pose, his hands steepled in front of his face. "I disagree," he stated. "I rather think this has given me an idea as to how to get Harry out of trouble."

Sirius leaned forward from his chair, obviously interested, as did Elicia. "Do tell," Sirius urged.

"We're going to need your body double, Sirius," William told the older man. "Get him to book an interview with the BBC—I'll take care of providing the information he needs."

Sirius blinked. "What on earth for?" he asked dubiously. "Wouldn't it be suspicious if 'I' come to speak on this event? I'm already publicly linked to him as his uncle," Sirius reminded the younger man.

For the first time in quite some time, Elicia saw William smile. Granted, it wasn't a happy smile, but rather one displayed by people who come with a cunning plan.

"Trust me. Get him on the phone with the BBC and whoever else will listen to him, and tell him to tell them that it's about Harry Potter."

Sirius stared at the young man uncertainly for a moment before giving in and nodding, simultaneously pulling out his cell phone and leaving the room to have some privacy. Back in the living room, John, Ana, and Elicia were left looking at William as though he'd lost his mind.

"Are we supposed to be giving Harry more limelight here?" asked John heatedly. "'Cause it seems to me, nothing we say at this point could possibly make him look good!"

"On the contrary," William disagreed. "This is a perfect opportunity to promote his image of a wronged, loyal citizen. Trust me on this—we'll come out of this crisis more powerful than ever."

Elicia looked at the young man she'd known since her teen years searchingly. "Are you sure this will work?" she asked, her voice wavering between seriousness and anxiety.

William met her eyes and nodded once, firmly. "It will."

Elicia was silent as she tried to interpret his eyes, willing him mentally to show some form of emotional assuredness that his plan would work. It was a lost cause, of course—William was about as readable as a piece of smooth, solid concrete. She would have to take his word on faith, it seemed.

HMP Belmarsh, London, United Kingdom, April 19th, 2010 (D-Day +449)…

Harry wondered how long he would wait.

Following the fight in central London, he had, as he had promised, put the cuffs back on in full view of the Corporal he'd convinced to set him free, and then allowed the authorities to move him into another car, which had brought him to his newest accommodation, the Category A prison of Belmarsh in Thamesmead.

Of course, given his unique status as both a highly dangerous mage and a extremely well trained soldier, he had not been placed with the general prison population, instead being relegated to solitary confinement as the authorities worked hurriedly to fix the public relations mess caused by the attack.

While he had no issues with being separated from the most dangerous individuals in the United Kingdom, Harry did have a problem with the absolutely dullness of being completely alone. At least in Spain, the Weasley woman had come to visit him—if only to annoy him or try to pry out information.

Idly, he wondered if she survived the crash against the wall.

As he did with most of the Magical World, Harry had little interest in the woman's wellbeing, seeing how she was an antagonistic force in his plans. In fact, rationally speaking, it would probably be in his best interests if she did perish, though he certainly wasn't about to go out of his way to pray for such a thing. While he held no anxiety for her wellbeing, he was also not so disparaging as to demand her immediate termination. Even adopting a neutral position would serve him, after all.

The truth was, he did have some respect for the woman. She was a skilled fighter, and for one reason or another, she had decided to keep him company during his incarceration in Spain, despite his murder of her two companions. He wondered if she'd been seeing either of the men, given her extreme reaction following their deaths. He doubted it, though—her attitude screamed 'by the book,' and that type of person usually held to that very strictly when it came to their love life.

His thoughts turned to the other women in his life then.

Elicia was, of course, first on his mind. How long had it been since he'd seen her? Over a year now, wasn't it? Had she changed much? Did she still love him as he loved her? How had her work with the

fuel crystals progressed? There were other questions, of course, but those were mostly answered by Josefina's briefings while he was still in jail in Spain. Nonetheless, he held deep longing to see her, at the very least. If he was lucky, he might even get to stroke her hair, or even give her a kiss soon, if he dared to dream.

As it was, however, he was resigned to waiting until Sirius and William—the two people he trusted most with his wellbeing—got him out of this situation.

The next woman on his mind was his little sister, Isabella. Last he had heard of her—from Josefina, no less—was that she and her parents had gone underground in Canada. She had even applied for a leave of absence at her university, which saddened Harry a great deal, since he put a lot of stock in a good, higher-level education. Her most recent photograph remained with him, though, and he kept it in his untidy uniform, which they had yet to confiscate from him—probably as a result of all the chaos from the attack.

Last among the women in his life, and yet never least, was his mother. He wondered how she and his dad were coping with the situation. While they had indeed funded quite a bit of his projects, he had always gotten the impression that the means he employed to reach his goals did not sit well with them. He could understand that—they were both children who had grown up in the middle of a rather violent civil war within the magical community; in fact, they had even escaped said community to avoid ever having to deal with the violence and corruption that their world had become synonymous with. Yet, here he was, their eldest son, deliberately baiting the Ministry of Magic into a position where civil war was increasingly becoming a very real possibility.

Was he being filially impious? Was he shaming them with every step he took towards punishing those he believed righteously deserved punishment? After all, it had been their suffering that had put him on his current path. Who knows what kind of person he would have been, had the Magical World decided not to pursue his family across Europe? Perhaps he would have been a soldier, as he is now, or even a policeman. Perhaps he would have been a teacher, or even just a professional athlete. He smiled ironically at the latter. While he did enjoy playing some sports, he wasn't much for betting his livelihood on his ability to kick a ball or running around.

Harry sighed as he opened his eyes to gaze at his bare cell. This was exactly why he hated being secluded away from other people—his mind wandered too much, generally not along paths he wanted it to.

It annoyed him, of course, that they had even bothered to seclude him. Had he not proven to the authorities that he had no desire to escape? He would've thought that clearing the area of the Death Eaters—which was no small feat, considering he wasn't used to fighting other wizards—would've bought him some good faith.

Clang.

Harry looked up as he heard the door down the hallway open up, the telltale sound of the steel bolts receding into the heavy door alerting him to the presence of other people. He didn't have to wait long for the sound of shoes hitting concrete to get replaced by visible people at his cell door. Three men. All guards.

"Morning, lads," Harry greeted with an easy smile. "Is it breakfast time already?"

One of the guards raised an eyebrow, while the other two remained stony-faced.

"Colonel White, your presence is requested at Visiting Room number fifteen," one of the stony-faced men informed him.

Now it was Harry's turn to raise an eyebrow. Two things got his interest immediately—the use of his fake name and official military rank, and the fact that he had a visitor. Considering that he was not expecting Elicia, Sirius, William, John, his parents, or sister to come visit him—or that the government would allow such a thing—that meant that whoever had managed to arrange this meeting had some decent leverage. He was quite curious as to who that would be.

Getting to his feet, he nodded at the guards and stood in the middle of the cell as the guards relayed the order to open the cell door via portable microphone. As per protocol, he was frisked by one of the guards while the other two watched, hands on their deployable batons in case he got…excitable. An unnecessary display of authority, of course, given his unwillingness to start anything with the guards, and so he allowed the process to happen without incident.

After going through the safety procedures, the guards escorted Harry down the prison's hallways until they reached the visiting room in question, usually set aside for convicts to talk to their lawyers. Given that Harry had no legal representative accredited within the magical community, however, he was rather certain he wouldn't be talking legal strategy in the room.

Indeed, as he stepped into the room, his suspicions were immediately confirmed as his first view of the room revealed to him a rather well dressed gentleman sitting in the chair opposite his. The man's fine tailored suit, coupled with the pocket watch Harry spotted in the man's waistcoat and the fine leather shoes, told him that whoever this was, he was quite wealthy, and thus probably quite important. He was also, Harry guessed, several decades older than him, judging from the greying hair and the few wrinkles on the man's long, high-cheekbone face.

"Ah, welcome, Colonel White, welcome!" the man officiously greeted him, his tone suggesting they had known each other for years, even though Harry had no idea who this was. The man waved him to the empty chair on the other side of the table. "Please, have a seat!"

Harry glanced at the guards flanking him for a moment, which the man seemed to catch, judging by his shooing motion towards them.

"Leave us, leave us!" he ordered. "I'm quite certain the good Colonel here wishes me no harm!"

The least emotionally stunted guard looked uncertain at the order. "But…sir…we have orders…"

Whatever amiability the wealthy man had expressed was instantly gone, replaced by a narrow-eyed, sinister glare. "Unless you want to end up on the dole in the next five seconds, leave us!" he barked.

The guards jumped at the sudden burst of anger but quickly rallied and left the man with their charge, obviously rethinking who the bigger threat to them was at the moment. To Harry's amusement and interest, the man's amiability seemed to return just as quickly as it left.

Taking his seat, Harry looked at the man curiously. "I should thank you," he started, courteously nodding his head in thanks to the man. "Life in that little cell of mine was getting awfully dull without human contact."

The man waved away the thanks with a smile. "Oh, think nothing of it," he replied. "Though I would have thought your opening statement would have been a demand for my name, seeing as how I seem to know yours."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I had considered doing so," he informed the man. "But I then concluded courtesy came first."

The man nodded, still smiling. Harry wondered if the man had gone through special training to manage keeping the smile so…consistent. "Well, that is reassuring," the man said while beaming at Harry. "Given your unusual background, I was wondering whether or not common courtesy protocols had been taught to you."

Harry didn't need further explanation to understand what he meant by unusual background. "Mages are still people, sir," he replied politely. "My parents were quite insistent that I learn proper manners; as, I suspect other magical parents are."

The man nodded quickly, his hands up in a soothing gesture. "Yes, yes, of course!" he said quickly. "Forgive me if I made any offense! We just don't know so much about your kind…"

It was Harry's turn to shrug away an action. "That's understandable," he conceded. "But, as you mentioned previously, I don't yet know who you are, or more importantly, why you wanted to see me."

Now the man broke out into a huge smile. To Harry's consternation, it seemed entirely genuine, too.

"Ah, yes, of course!" he said, standing up and offering his left hand. "Forgive me, I forgot entirely. I am Joshua Bygate, Baron Warwick, currently a member of the House of Lords."

Harry was now completely stumped. Why on earth would a noble, much less a member of the House of Lords, come to see him? He would have thought that, with the public backlash towards the reveal

of magic, no sane member of government would ever go near him until the situation had calmed down.

Slowly, he regained his focus and stood to awkwardly shake the man's hand, given his currently cuffed state. "Harry Potter," he introduced himself. "Or Lieutenant Colonel Francis White, Military Mage, as you seem to know me."

The man smiled charmingly. "Ah, excuse me. I actually know your real identity as well," he informed Harry. "It's just, I can't help but feel that Francis White has a more…distinguished sound to it than Harry Potter, don't you?"

Harry wisely chose not to comment, as defending his parents' decision might offend his guest—whom he still knew nothing about. Instead, he focused on a more important question. "Honoured though I feel that you've come all this way to meet me, why are you here, milord?"

His visitor waved away the term. "Please, call me Joshua," he insisted. "I reserve the use of niceties for whenever someone has me in an unhappy mood." He watched Harry nod in acceptance and smiled brightly. "As for my reasons being here, why…I let's just say I wish to offer you the opportunity to have an inside man in the House of Lords. As far as I'm aware, your sole contact in the British government is in fact Michael White, your alleged uncle?"

Harry was instantly on guard, uncertain at the moment whether or not the man was trying to bait him to reveal Sirius' identity. It took him a few seconds of observation to conclude that the man's inquiry was perfectly genuine…or at least seemed so.

"…Correct," he confirmed.

To Harry's immense relief, there was no follow up to that link. Instead, the nobleman smiled widely with a triumphant expression. "Excellent! Then you understand, Colonel, that any further allies you can acquire at this stage would prove invaluable, no?"

Harry was hard pressed to disagree. There wasn't a single thing the man had said that was wrong, thus far. "You are…quite correct, mi—Joshua," he corrected himself at the last second. "However, I

cannot help but be curious at the fact that you would ally yourself with a criminal such as myself."

Joshua smiled, but not the same way he'd been doing thus far. This smile was more predatory, as though he was privy to some cunning plan no one else was.

"You are behind the news, it seems, Colonel," he noted before gesturing towards something or someone behind Harry's back and then returning his attention back to the dark haired young man before him. "Just yesterday, your uncle, it would seem, managed to secure prime time exclusive interviews with the BBC, ITV, and other major news networks and delivered a most impassioned plea in favour of your release. The opinion polls this morning seem to show a massive swing in your favour."

Just then, the door opened and a man carrying a small, square-ish device walked in, placing it silently before Harry and then, with a short tap on the side, opened it up to reveal a small television screen, while a DVD was clearly visible in the middle, already ready to play.

"Please, observe for yourself," the Lord Warwick suggested, apparently signalling the aide to begin the recorded transmission.

Instantly, the screen came alive and the scene Harry was treated to was that of Sirius, or rather his double he hoped, sitting before Jeremy Paxman, one of the BBC's most renowned political commentators and interviewers.

"So let me get this straight, you are not, in fact, a blood relation of former Lieutenant Colonel Francis White, also known as Harry Potter?" Paxman was asking Sirius, who shook his head.

"Unfortunately not," Sirius confirmed. "Rather, I adopted young Francis into my household when he was young, as a favour to his parents, who could not be there for him."

"And yet, there are reports of the Potters being an incredibly wealthy family within this…Magical community," Paxman pointed out.

"Wealthy? Certainly, but incapable of raising him in his native England, on the run as they were from the shameful persecution of

the Ministry of Magic," Sirius reminded Paxman. "That wasn't a life they wanted for him, and I, naturally, understood that, so I offered them a way out."

"By adopting their son and taking him away from them?" came the sarcastic question.

Sirius laughed away the insolence. "Of course not. By providing him the safe haven of an alternate identity. You can't possibly deny the absurd lengths that the Ministry seems to have gone to in order to retrieve my ward, Jeremy. By taking on my name, it ensured he would not be harassed by the Ministry during his development."

Harry couldn't help but smile at the way Sirius (or was that his double?) was weaving such an incredible story. It wasn't completely bollocks, but the order had been reversed. It was actually Sirius who had taken on the White name second, not Harry.

"Charitable indeed," Paxman noted with a tight smile. "But tell us, what do you get out of this? However altruistic your actions may be, surely there was some motive for taking on this youth from a family that, by your own admission, you knew only professionally."

Sirius smiled. "Engaging as ever, Jeremy. You're right, of course; I did earn something from the bargain," he conceded. "Young Francis himself. Trust me, if you ever met my adopted nephew, you would marvel at the mind he possesses. He is my finest advisor, and my most trusted confidante."

A plausible statement, if again mixed up in the roles. Harry didn't even notice the fascinated expression he'd developed as he watched the video, which was in turn scrutinized by his visitor.

"All very interesting, to be sure, but back to the topic at hand; I've been told that you've asked for a chance to vouch for your nephew, who is, at this moment, held in government custody. Could you please elaborate?"

Sirius was still all smiles. Harry wondered if he, or his double, ever helped facial cramps from all the smiling done in front of the cameras. "Of course! Quite simply, it is my opinion that my nephew is being illegally detained, since he has committed no crimes."

Paxman looked entirely befuddled by this statement. "How could you possibly make that argument?" he asked bewilderedly, for once taken off guard. "According to the details released by the Ministry of Magic, your nephew is in transgression of at least twenty different laws!"

"Whose laws, Jeremy?" challenged Sirius. "The Ministry's laws? Or the laws of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Because I think you'll find there's a great deal of difference between the two codes."

"I…would suppose the Ministry's laws, as he is a citizen of that…"

Sirius struck right then. "Is he?" he challenged again. "Since when? Due to what paperwork? Even in our normal world, Jeremy, citizenship isn't automatic—there are forms to fill out. I can honestly tell you, Jeremy, that I have certainly not signed any documentation making my nephew a citizen of the mage community. My nephew, for his part, has consistently made clear to me his absolute abhorrence for the society that all but forced his parents into fleeing the country, so I really don't see him filling out the paperwork either."

Paxman blinked at this new information, and even through the television, Harry could discern the predatory gleam that had just appeared in the reporter's eyes. "So you are in fact saying that the Ministry has no jurisdiction over this matter?" he wanted direct confirmation.

Sirius nodded firmly. "Correct, Jeremy," he answered. "As my nephew is a citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and most certainly not a citizen of the mage community, the Ministry of Magic's laws should not have any sway in regulating his dealings."

"Isn't that just a license for other mages to free themselves from the reins of senior magic users and do whatever they want, however?" Paxman countered.

Sirius shrugged. "It is a loophole, I agree, and probably one they should fix. However, that being said, even if they did amend their citizenship laws, any attempts at making it retroactive would, at this time, be both futile in containing the revelation of magic to the world,

as well as appearing as simply an act of spite against my nephew by a humiliated Ministry."

Harry could've sworn he saw a grin forming on Paxman's face before it was just as quickly restrained into a tight smile. Harry couldn't blame the man; Sirius was just laying on the ammunition for future grilling of Ministry officials. He blinked perplexedly when the image went dark at that moment, and looked up to see his visitor smiling.

"That's all we recorded of the show, I'm afraid," he apologized. "I could have the BBC send you a copy of the full thing, if you'd like."

Harry nodded silently and leaned back to contemplate what he'd just seen. It didn't take him long to connect the dots.

"So, if I'm to understand this correctly, you wish to make an ally out of me while the political fallout from this apparent legal fiasco is still raging, thereby profiting from the association?" he posed. He could sense the baron's aide bristling, but whatever the man was about to say was cut off by the baron's laughter.

"Bright and blunt!" noted Joshua with an approving grin. "Well, you've certainly hit the nail on the head there, my young friend. So? How about it?" he asked, leaning forward onto the table and putting forward an offering hand. "I'm not soothsayer, boy, but I can tell when a blessed opportunity comes my way. Frankly, I'm tired of the pseudo-political life of the House of Lords and just from this little chat, I can see you're my best shot out of it and up the ladder. In turn, I help your uncle get the legislatures on your side, and even help finance the whole deal."

Harry didn't let up with the suspicion, however. "That's quite a lot you're offering, milord, especially with so little coming your own way…why the charity?"

"There's something in the air, my young friend," the baron said with a knowing smile. "It smells of change…and change is bloody and often unforgiving to those in its way. Let's just say I want to be on the right side of the battlefield when it comes."

This time Harry did give up his suspicions. That statement alone had proved to Harry of the man's genuineness, as no politician would

openly declare their willingness to jump ship at any coming shift in political favour, and yet this man had carelessly laid it out in the open—something that they both knew could destroy the lordly politician if it ever were to come to light, as no one would ever trust him again.

Harry extended his arms and clasped the baron's offered hand with one of his own, smiling. "I believe we have can have an understanding, Joshua."

The baron smiled toothily. "To a long and prosperous relationship, then, Colonel."

London, United Kingdom, May 8th, 2010 (D-Day +467)…

Harry had truly underestimated the benefits of having Lord Warwick on his side.

About a week had gone by since his meeting with the strange aristocrat, and already he'd been bailed out of jail by a combination of passionate rhetoric in both Houses of Parliament by Sirius and Joshua, and a massive propaganda blitz redeeming Harry's image. As it was, the courts had been…persuaded by public opinion and the Houses of Parliament to allow Harry to remain under house arrest until his legal standing was finally figured out.

A feat that, by the way, had been made utterly complicated by Sirius' revelation that Harry had never, technically, been made a citizen of the magical community, as James and Lily were both living in hiding by the time Harry was born and had then fled the country shortly after the attack. Harry's parents had even sent Sirius a legal affidavit to that end, making it even harder for the Ministry to demand turning Harry over to magical custody.

It was, in a sense, truly awe-inspiring the amount of red tape two dedicated politicians could summon to wreck their opponents' plans. Even the Ministry-supporters in Parliament—notably, people who seemed either fearful of magic and wanted it gone from their immediate lives or respected it to the point of dedicated loyalty—were having a hard time finding the legal grounding for which to keep Harry under lock and key.

It had gotten worse, naturally, when Sirius then leaked the news that the Ministry and the ICW wanted him executed for his crimes. As the death penalty had long since been abolished in the UK, the public backlash had been considerable, and the Prime Minister was being given more and more reason to have Harry released with every passing day.

The biggest reason of all was, of course, Spain. Since his departure from the battlefield, the 2nd Army's success rate had diminished slightly, albeit not significantly. While the Army could do without Harry in the field, it was quickly becoming obvious to many that his presence had saved a great deal of lives, as the death toll of the 2nd Army had risen considerably since his departure. Even now, military commanders could be heard making public appeals to the government to release Harry back to his duty so that "British lives could be saved from an unnecessary death."

There was an easy solution to that, of course—Harry could just hand over the military mages that he had ordered trained in secret. The problem was, he couldn't do so without risking the military deciding to withdraw its vocal support with the arrival of suitable replacements for him. It was heartless, yes, and it was causing many a death in the ranks, but Harry was not about to allow himself to be abandoned by a necessary ally.

Which was why he was having this meeting with the military brass at his loft in central London. Understandably, he was still under heavy guard, but the barbarically backwards anti-magical cuffs had been taken away.

"You're saying you can provide more of you?" asked one of the generals present, a blatantly greedy expression on his face.

"Well, they won't be as proficient as I am in magic that would be useful to the military, but I can promise that they'll be trained enough that all they'll need is the experience, sir," Harry drawled casually, having steepled his hands before him. "The thing is, and I'm sure you understand, sir, I can't train anyone while under house arrest."

"And you have no one you trust that can do so in your stead?" asked another general suspiciously.

"Like myself, they are probably wanted by the Ministry, sir," Harry reminded the older man respectfully. "As such, I cannot, in good conscience, ask them to come out in the open."

The Minister for Defence, a wiry, sickly-pale looking fellow—ironically enough, considering the men he was technically in charge of—nodded at Harry's statement; he personally suspected that the Minister was more of a politician than a capable minister, and so was, like Joshua had, fishing for a rapprochement with Harry, given his rising (positive) fame among the public.

"Understandable, yes," the Minister agreed. "Such a pity that the Ministry won't let up on their demands."

Harry nodded, making a big show of looking disappointed and solemn. "Indeed so…having these mages trained for our country's security had been a private desire of mine for some time now, and yet it was only recently that I came into the funds necessary to finance such a project," he lied smoothly. "Unfortunately, with the Ministry now seeking my imprisonment, I fear such a project would never come to fruition."

"Why not do it ourselves?" asked one general, looking at Harry suspiciously. "We could set aside some of the budget for such a mage training initiative."

Harry shrugged—he had already considered that proposal. "You are welcome to try, sir, but if I may be so bold, you would probably fail."

"Why's that, Potter?" asked the same general dangerously.

"Mages naturally distrust non-mages," Harry replied simply. "We are too different, too removed from their society that they cannot help but feel anxiety when they see the awesome and powerful technology we wield with ease. They feel threatened in their superiority, and so they clamp down on their tolerance and become unwilling to accept us as their equals."

"You don't include yourself with them," noted one of the more even-tempered generals. "Do you truly feel no attachment to the mage community?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "Respectfully, sir, what do I owe them? Nothing. They have harassed my family, harassed me, and now intervened in a major national security issue just to retrieve me for breaking laws that, as my uncle pointed out, have no bearing on me."

"That hasn't been confirmed, one way or the other," the mildly hostile general pointed out through gritted teeth.

Harry shrugged. "Perhaps not yet, but my uncle spoke the truth, and my parents have laid their credibility on the line in their affidavit that they never made me a citizen of the magical community," he riposted casually.

The hostile general fell silent, but Harry could still sense that the man wasn't quite ready to give up on the argument. Fortunately, he was disallowed to do so by the intervention of the more level-headed in the group.

"Assuming we agree to employ these military mages," the even-tempered general mused out loud. No one bought the rhetorical aspect of the question—it was clear that everyone, save perhaps the hostile general, wanted the military mages in the UK's arsenal. "…what are your terms?"

Harry played innocent. "Terms, sir? I am still a soldier, am I not? Were I capable of going to the training field, you could just order me to train them, sir, and I would."

It was perhaps the subtlest way that Harry could get his desire through to the group. The Minister for Defence, of course, got it immediately, while the generals needed a few more seconds to see through the innocent façade.

The hostile general, naturally, seemed ready to explode with outrage, but was quickly silenced by his colleagues, who each shot him a dangerous look that got him to shut up. The even-tempered general, rising to his feet, nodded at Harry and saluted, which Harry reciprocated once he got to his feet as well.

"I shall look forward to seeing you on the training fields, then, Lieutenant Colonel," the general stated ceremoniously. "A fine

soldier like yourself will undoubtedly be found innocent of these so-called criminal charges."

Harry nodded once, firmly. "Thank you, sir, for your faith in me."

No such thing had been said, nor did any such thing probably exist, but as the military men departed the guarded loft, Harry knew that they had reached a positive understanding. Now, all he had to do was sit back and watch as the Ministry of Magic's tenuous hold on him collapsed even further.

London, United Kingdom, May 10th, 2010 (D-Day +469)….

It was beautiful to watch, in Harry's opinion.

Sitting before the television, still guarded by quite a few SAS servicemen who had strict orders to kill him if he tried to flee the premises, Harry watched as the Parliamentary session, which would see him a free man, convened.

There was, of course, quite a bit of debate on other matters before they even reached his case, which had been brought up, much to his surprise, not by Sirius but by some coalition backbencher. Rather than use a bill, however, Sirius, Joshua, and his supporters had gone straight for a motion, knowing that trying to free Harry via a bill would take precious time during which their opponents to vilify him. As they were riding on a high of public approval, however, Sirius—with some probable prodding from William, Harry had no doubt—had pushed for the motion instead.

Before his very eyes, Harry watched as opponent after opponent to Sirius' motion to reject Ministry authority over his case was beset by mass booing's in the House of Commons. He watched as Sirius and other supporters—almost all of which Harry didn't even know by name—rallied behind him and pressed for Harry's release.

It was quite clear to anyone who watched that the vote, when it would come, was firmly in favour of Harry's release. Between Sirius and Joshua, the two men had managed to rally an astounding amount of support for Harry, which he credited to the Lord Warwick's cunning mind for propaganda and Sirius' natural charisma.

The SAS guards, too, seemed riveted by the debates carrying on in the House of Commons. More than once, Harry spied a few of them using wireless radios to keep themselves informed—undoubtedly so they could be the first ones to know what was to become of their charge. Not out of concern for his personal welfare—they were far too well trained to allow themselves to make a connection with their prisoner—but probably rather to know whether they would be getting reassigned elsewhere by the end of the day.

Harry's attention returned to the television, and he smirked as he watched and heard Sirius shatter an opponent's arguments, always sticking to his guns regarding the Ministry's limits of authority. To Sirius' credits, he kept his temper—allegedly legendary in his youthful days—firmly in check, even as their opponents tried to goad him into anger by alleging that his entire interest lay within the financial benefits that Harry's continued livelihood with him was undoubtedly bringing him from the Potters.

The debate took more time than one would have imagined would be allotted to a procedural motion, but eventually it did come to voting. Almost ominously, the Speaker of the House demanded silence from the raucous room and then ordered that those in favour make themselves known, causing a good 2/3 of the room's MPs rise to their feet, while the defeated opposing MPs remained sitting, quietly seething.

When the Speaker asked for those against to stand, Harry knew it was more of a matter of procedure than actual doubt—Harry had firmly won this battle with the Ministry, and he had no doubts that they would know just how big a loss this was to them. By setting Harry free, the motion essentially legitimized (albeit tacitly) the existence of military mages, giving other mages within the Wizarding community the choice to leave the Ministry's rule.

To Harry's credit, he did not jump or dance, or do anything remotely embarrassing as the Speaker declared the motion passed. Instead, he just sat there, a cup of scotch in one hand, and smiled knowingly at the television. Sometimes, victory was not best celebrated by enthusiasm, but by simply knowing that the opposition had been defeated soundly.

He was not surprised, however, when later that day the Ministry sent an official statement to the news networks declaring that they would

refuse to recognize the House of Common's motion, insisting that it was well within its rights to demand the turnover of any rogue element of its community, as well as rejecting any claims that Harry was in fact not a Wizarding citizen. They then finished their statement with the promise that, one way or another, Harry would be made to be accountable for his crimes.

Sure enough, the Ministry's vow did not go over well with the populace, whose return polls from the newspapers that day seemed to indicate majority outrage towards the Ministry's recalcitrance. The House of Commons and the House of Lords also issued counter-statements, both condemning the Ministry for its refusal to bow to parliamentary authority. The Ministry, rather than responding, remained silent, and Harry had a feeling that this was just the prelude to something much worse.

London, United Kingdom, May 21st, 2010 (D-Day +480)…

Harry hated being right sometimes.

As he'd thought, the Ministry had indeed not backed down from its position that Harry was legally theirs to deal with, despite the mass popular and parliamentary support Harry had garnered. As a point of further defiance to the Ministry, the Muggle press even made a point of always referring to Harry as "Lieutenant Colonel Francis White, Military Mage," openly touting his continued loyalty to the government and not to them.

Predictably, after a few days of that happening, riots began to break out in London, mostly caused by wizards and witches who demanded that Harry be turned over for trial. The problem was that while protests were indeed a legal method of distributing their message, rioting was not, and so the police were more often than not found coming to blows with several of the more impetuous magic users.

The fact that these rioters used their magic liberally was particularly disturbing, however. While Harry had informed the police authorities that riot shields would be able to withstand most of what the average wizard and witch could throw, it didn't help sooth many a riot policeman's nerves as they watched the magic users make a mess of the streets of London.

The first riot had been eight days ago, on May 13th.

Now, as a result of the constant battling between the beleaguered and intimidated police force and the rioting wizards, Harry had been called to his new commanding officer's office at the Ministry of Defence.

To his surprise, the Minister for Defence was also present, sitting calmly in a lounge chair by the officer's desk, teacup and platter in hand.

"Ah, Colonel White, welcome," greeted Colonel Livingston, his new CO. Given that he had essentially promised to train more Military Mages, Harry assumed the brass had simply decided it easier to simply create a new regiment just for them. The 1st Mage Regiment, they would be called. Unimaginative, but self-explanatory, Harry supposed.

"Sir, reporting in as ordered!" he barked out as he went rigid and saluted his superior officer.

"At ease, White," Livingston replied easily, notably not motioning towards a chair. Clearly, this meeting was expected to end rather quickly. "I presume you know of the difficulties the police have been having in containing the mage riots?"

Harry nodded firmly. "Of course, sir. It's all over the news."

The Minister sighed at his response. "Quite unfortunate, that," he lamented as he placed his teacup and platter on the stand next to his seat. "It hasn't served to buoy public confidence."

The colonel nodded at the Minister's remarks, a neutral expression settling on his face as he then proceeded to look at Harry. "I've been told you're a smart man, White; please, what do you think will result if we do not contain the riots quickly?"

Harry thought the question through for a moment, not wishing to risk an erroneous gut response that might put off his superiors. "I…would expect a backlash from the general public," he hypothesized. "Maybe not in one go, but gradually, the general public would take the fight right back to the mages, which would in

turn escalate the hostilities until outright violence is all the interaction the two sides have with each other."

The Minister and colonel exchanged a glance before the colonel nodded at Harry and the Minister settled for looking out the nearby window.

"Correct. That is our assumption as well," he informed Harry. "Obviously, we cannot allow that to happen, and yet unfortunately, our police force has simply no training in containing mages on a rampage."

It wasn't that hard to see where the colonel was going with this. "You wish for me to deal with the riots myself, then, sir?" he pre-empted the colonel, who didn't seem at all surprised that Harry had understood the government's intentions.

"This is a damn shame," the Minister said, not turning to face the two. "But the fact is, we cannot allow the mages to continue with their rioting. It damage the government's credibility with every passing day, and we refuse to allow this obvious lack of respect for the government go unpunished. They are a ministry, not a country!"

Harry looked at the two men—one facing him, the other not—and silently mulled the situation. This was certainly one major way of erasing any further doubts as to his loyalties, and it would be a good way to measure himself against wizards in actual magical combat.

"I assume I will have backup?" he asked.

The colonel snorted. "Of course. We don't expect you to be able to take them all on by yourself. We'll have a company assigned to you for crowd control," he reassured his subordinate.

Harry nodded, hearing the Minister sigh in his chair.

"It's shameful that we've been brought to this point, where the military must be brought it to put down a riot, but we're out of options and out of time," he said miserably. "The Prime Minister has already given the nod for the operation, as has the Crown. The government is one hundred percent behind you, Colonel White."

Harry afforded himself a glance at the Minister, who had turned his head back to back the colonel, and Harry could see that the decision to mobilize army units to put down a riot wasn't sitting well with the man. Hell, it was probably not sitting well for most of the government, who probably feared the legitimization of using military force to put down civil riots.

Sweeping his eyes back to his superior, Harry gave a nod and saluted rigidly. "It will be done, sir."

The colonel nodded back, returning the salute. "Good. From what we can tell, the wizards begin their marches around 7:00 AM sharp, but always at a random location so we have little time to prepare. Be outside the MOD gates at 6:00 AM tomorrow morning and we'll have your support waiting for you. Once you get the location of the riot, you are to mobilize there and disperse it through any means necessary."

"Any means, sir?" Harry questioned.

The Minister blanched and grimaced, but did not protest to the colonel's order, which surprised Harry. Had the situation truly reached that point already? He'd misjudged how close they were to the edge.

"We have continuously sought to offer the Ministry a chance to back down peacefully, as legally they are in the wrong," the colonel told him firmly. "Their chances are now gone. The Prime Minister, and most importantly, the people want these riots gone. This isn't a crowd of innocent civilians, Lieutenant Colonel, but a violent mob. This is not Bloody Sunday, but self-defence. So yes, White, any means necessary. Understood?"

Harry was silent for a moment before nodding. "Yes, sir."

"Very good. Good luck tomorrow, White. Dismissed."

London, United Kingdom, May 22nd, 2010 (D-Day +481)….

Harry felt conflicted over what he was about to do.

Objectively, he knew that this was a perfect opportunity to solidify his support base in the general population, most of which were

outraged by the blatant disregard for the laws of the realm by the mages. Furthermore, it would showcase the versatility of a military mage, thus potentially making him an even more valuable commodity to the government. Lastly, it would probably get the Ministry to reconsider its position and back off, which would allow his loved ones to come out of hiding.

The problem was, he wasn't thrilled at being all but ordered to unleash the military might of the nation on a bunch of rioters. As a student of history, Harry knew that such actions mostly ended in a public relations disaster. Nonetheless, Harry reminded himself that those situations and this one were different. There would be no unarmed civilians in this protest. There would be no peaceful demonstrations, only violent rioting. The law was on the government's side, for once, as were the general masses.

So, all things considered, Harry was doing the right thing…right?

Ethical conflicts aside, he had shown up at the MOD half an hour early, wanting to be the first there. There, he sat on the steps of the MOD's front door, settling in for the wait. It didn't take long, thankfully. Within fifteen minutes of his wait, he heard the sound of multiple car engines approaching and, looking down the street, saw the convoy of Land Rover Wolfs coming towards him. Curious to see whom they'd assigned to him, he waited until they got nearer before getting up and walking to the edge of the sidewalk.

Enjoying the slight breeze caused by the passing first car, he watched as the convoy came to a stop and its occupants exited the vehicles. Harry immediately recognized the uniform as being that of the Royal Irish Rangers and felt darkly amused. Was this a way of referencing to the British Army's own failed past at crowd control?

Either way, he was about ready to give them an order to fall in when he watched them do so without prompting. Pleased with the show of proper discipline, he looked around for the commanding officer when the man stepped forward from the line of soldiers and approached him, giving the necessary salute in greeting.

"Captain Liam Doherty," he introduced himself. "Irish Rangers, 1st Battalion, B Company."

Harry returned the salute and smiled at the older man. "Lieutenant Colonel Harry Potter, Mage Regiment," he replied. "Your men ready for today, Captain?"

"Ready and waiting, sir," the captain confirmed with a nod. "Any word on the location of the riot yet, sir?"

Harry shook his head. "The Met is on the lookout and have orders to call it in the moment the mages appear," he informed his new subordinate. "Until then, we're to stay here and wait, understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

Harry nodded, pleased. "Very good. In the meantime, however, I want to go over the proper procedure for this kind of situation with you and your men, Captain."

"Sir?" asked the captain, somewhat confused.

"These are not normal rioters we are dealing with, captain, but mages," Harry reminded the Irishman. "The normal rules of engagement are not applicable in this case. To that end, I want to brief everyone on how best to take down a mage. Understood?"

"Perfectly, sir," Captain Doherty confirmed before turning to face his troops. "Company, fall in around the CO and I for immediate briefing!" he barked.

The order was repeated by the officers beneath him as they marshalled the rangers into a semi-circular pattern around their captain and Harry, who had taken a place by the side of one of the Land Rovers. Once they were gathered appropriately, Harry began the briefing.

"The first thing you have to understand about the common mage is that magic is everything to them," he informed the group. "They use so often for any particular task that it is essentially another appendage of their body. Take that magic from them, and they're helpless. The problem, however, is that there is no way of doing this by secondary means, meaning no anti-magic machines, and no anti-magic bullets."

Snapping his right hand fingers, Harry summoned a small flame that he moulded into the figure of a person. He smiled as he heard many a bewildered curse. As with most Britons, they had probably not seen magic before the big reveal, so any new instance of the fact was probably quite shocking still.

"A mage at full power has no vulnerable spots," he continued, having the flame figure seemingly bounce off smaller pellets of fire. "They have spells that can stop kinetic attacks without much effort, and so as the police will no doubt tell you, it is incredibly difficult to bring one down in a straight, one on one gunfight. Fortunately, we will not be fighting this way."

Harry crushed the flame figure in his hand by curling it into a fist. "The key to taking down a mage is simple: exhaust his magic. Most specifically, make him exhaust his magic by being on the defensive," he told them. "While rapid-firing spells is something that the Ministry teaches its mages, simultaneous spells are something none of them can do. Thus, if they have a shield up, they must continue holding up that shield or else it will come down. The only known exception to this rule are wards, which sustain their power via secondary artefacts placed along specific patterns throughout a very select location."

He watched as at least the NCOs and officers grasped what he was saying, though many a private seemed a little lost by all this talk of magic—he didn't blame them, given how alien it must all sound.

"Kinetic energy is one way to deplete the mage's magical capacity," he continued. "By this, of course, I mean levelling as much firepower as possible on their protective spells. While magical energy would be more effective, bullets, grenades, or any other form of weaponry we have will also do."

He saw many a nod as everyone seemed to understand, making him smiled in a pleased fashion. "Good. Now, the biggest issue with mages is that taking one from the front, nevermind a crowd, is always a bad idea if one is not a mage as well. A single shield spell can cover more than one person, which means that while we try to exhaust one mage, the other could still be firing on us. To that end, we must avoid a frontal confrontation with them and instead focus on unleashing our firepower through every possible angle we can

come up with. That's lesson number two about shields: they are flat and can only cover from one direction," he lectured.

"As such, we will be dividing into operational section. Each section, in turn, will be given a position based on the terrain we will be fighting in to maximize the coverage of our firepower in the even that hostilities do break out," he stated. "This will mean taking to the roofs of nearby buildings and lying in ambush once we ascertain where the mages are rioting. Any questions?"

One of the NCOs, a sergeant, raised his hand. "Sir," he started with a thick Irish brogue. "I apologize, but I'm still a bit confused. Why would our bullets have a detrimental effect on magical shields?"

Harry smiled. "Magical shields are simply a superior form of Kevlar, sergeant," he told the man. "While it is designed to stop energy from reaching you, enough energy—be it magical or kinetic—will break through," he informed the group before seeing an opportunity to drive in his point. "With magical spells, a powerfully charged spell, even if its effects are not lethal, will easily break through a moderately powered shield. Since only I can do something like that, I can stay at the frontal barricades with a small support team. With bullets, however, you must be very cunning. Rather than all aim at multiple areas to try and thin out the magical reinforcement, you should aim all at a singular point and just try to punch a hole into it. At the rate our weapons fire, this would mean that the same point would have to continuously get magically reinforced at a rate that will deplete the mage's reserves at an astonishing rate," he lectured, before then sweeping his gaze across the gathered soldiers. "Any other questions?"

"Sir," Captain Doherty raised his hand. "Wouldn't it have been best to ask for heli support, seeing as how we're to get to the rooftops?" he asked. "After all, we could then just take positions at the actual riot site, rather than have to lay in ambush."

Harry shook his head. "Magic has a catastrophic effect on modern technology," he informed the captain. "If the support helicopters were to get simply grazed by an errant or well-aimed spell, it would be enough to short-circuit every electrical piece of equipment on board."

Captain Doherty blanched at the thought but nodded, satisfied with his superior's honest answer.

"Is that why we're not getting any form of mechanical support, like APCs?" asked a private.

Harry nodded. "Exactly the reason, soldier. With our Wolfs, we can travel light and fast, but we won't get crippled if their electrical equipment gets fried. With APCs, we could have soldiers getting stuck inside with no way out," he said. "Any other questions?"

"Any spells we should be on the lookout for, sir?" asked another sergeant.

Harry nodded, his expression grim. "If you see a flash of green, duck for cover. That's the Avada Kedavra spell and, while illegal, it is a favourite spell of the more extremist members of the magical community. Also, if any of you notice one of our own seemingly collapsing from seizures, take him out of sight of the mob—that's the Cruciatus Curse, a vicious torture curse that is also quite illegal. For the last one, I've got an idea that I'll brief you on shortly. Any last questions?"

This time, silence descended on the group, and after waiting for a minute for any sudden questions, Harry nodded and clapped his hands. "Good. Now, as for ection assignments…"

The briefing continued for perhaps another thirty minutes before Harry got done, and by then, the whole company was waiting anxiously in their jeeps for the call to come in that the riot had begun. Harry, sitting in the lead jeep, had his eye on the car's digital clock, noting that it was now 7:00 AM and still the police hadn't radioed in the location of the riot…if it had even begun.

At 7:15, Harry began to feel about as anxious as his men were, his left foot tapping the floor of the car restlessly.

"This is ridiculous," Harry hissed as he rubbed his forehead, glaring at the clock. "Colonel Livingston said go-time was 7:00 AM and still nothing!"

"Maybe the mages decided to pass on rioting today, sir?" suggested a Lieutenant sitting in the back seat.

Harry shook his head. "They know full well how damaging they're being, and the Ministry's not going to let up that easily. They want this to push the Prime Minister and Parliament to rescind the motion that set me free," he groused irritably. "It's not a question of if, Lieutenant, but of when."

"Yes, sir," the Lieutenant replied a bit meekly, obviously clued in to his superior's irritation.

At that moment, the radio began to crackle, making most of the people inside the car jump from surprise. Harry quickly rallied, however, and snatched the mike from its holster.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Francis White," he spoke into the mike, fully aware of how tense everyone in the car was. "Say again, over."

This time, a clear transmission came through, and Harry felt his stomach leap. "This is Officer Preston, from the Metropolitan Police Service. Rioters have been spotted at Charring Cross and Shaftesbury!" the report came in. "Repeat, Charring Cross and Shaftesbury! Be aware that the mob seems to be heading down Shaftesbury!"

Harry nodded and lifted the mike back to his lips. "Copy that, we're on our way, out," he assured the policeman before holstering the mike again and then turning to the driver. "Private, you heard the man: Charring Cross and Shaftesbury. Lieutenant, pass the word down."

Both men complied with Harry's orders as he settled into his seat, his right hand clenching and releasing as he tried to loosen his body up for the coming fight.

During the ride to Charring Cross and Shaftesbury, however, Harry had the convoy make a detour via Lisle Street, as he was determined to bypass the mob and have his men settle in for the ambush they'd planned. Fortunately, with reports of rioting happening in the area, traffic was pretty dead, allowing the convoy to move around rather liberally.

Furthermore, he had the police keep him updated as to the mob's location, and was relieved to hear that they hadn't yet begun their

march, as they seemed to be coordinating themselves still. That gave him time enough to reach a closer location, and as the driver pulled onto Shaftesbury Avenue further down the road from where the rioters were, he found the perfect ambush spot.

"Here, stop!" he ordered the driver, who quickly complied. Harry leaned out the window and looked around at their surroundings, his eyes taking in the amount of high ground his men could occupy and the narrow road that would be easy to barricade with the jeeps. "Perfect. Everyone out!"

True to their training, the soldiers quickly hustled out of the jeeps and onto the street. Harry quickly pointed out the drivers. "Park the jeeps into a barricade across the street; make sure to have them showing the side rather than the front—we don't want to give the mages an easy time pushing them aside."

"Yes, sir!"

While the drivers went back to their vehicles to carry out his orders, Harry turned his attention to several squads. "Captain Doherty, take two sections and get to the top of those rooftops," he pointed out said structure. "Sergeant Murphy, take three and man the rooftops opposite Captain Doherty. If hostilities erupt, send the third section to the of the mob and have them harass the enemy, understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Remaining men, man the barricade behind me. We have to give the impression that the main force is at the front and keep their attention off the rooftops," he commanded. "And let's hurry it up, people! They may be slow to start, but once the spells fly, there won't be any time to catch your breath!" he shouted at the retreating forms of his men as they hurried to fulfil his orders.

Satisfied that the men were carrying out their duties appropriately, Harry walked to the newly formed car barricade and took a position just in front of it, waiting for the mob to come. While foolhardy, the move was deliberately calculated to focus the mob's attention on him and not the armed men at his back. That way, he could take on the brunt of the magical attacks while the men sniped off the casters from above.

Five minutes hadn't passed before he heard his earpiece come alive with static, followed immediately by reports of readiness from the sections all around him. Glancing up, he could see the odd muzzle of an assault rifle poking just over the ledge, or sometimes an Irish green beret. Fortunately, there wasn't yet enough sunlight to glint off the weaponry, or else they might have already been given away.

Shortly after the readiness transmissions, the mob came within Harry's view, having just passed the slight curve after the Palace Theatre which, even now, Harry could see seemed to be emitting alarmingly black smoke. He made a personal note to himself to call the fire brigade once the whole business was over.

As the mob grew closer, Harry clenched his hands together behind his back tightly, the natural tension he was feeling heightening as he prepared himself to fight what would have, under different circumstances, been his brethren. Right now, however, they were the government's enemy, and thus his.

He waited for them to get within earshot before calling out to them. "You will cease this public disturbance immediately and surrender yourselves to the authorities!" he demanded sternly, although he did use a bit of wandless magic to enhance his voice so that it carried over the mass destruction the mages were causing.

Almost immediately, the raucous mob seemed to realize that Harry was in fact blocking their path. Considering that he was the focus of their current predicament, they also didn't need long to realize who he was. And then the taunts began.

"Oh look! It's the Muggles' pet wizard!"

"Scared of us, are they?"

"Let's catch him and hang him ourselves, lads!"

"Hang him!"

"Kill him!"

Etcetera ad nauseam, and so forth. Harry had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes at the mob, whose collective IQ and vocabulary made them on par with a particularly decomposing shoe.

"You are in violation of the laws set forth by the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland!" he repeated, his voice easily dwarfing their with his magic. "You will surrender yourselves to us, or we will take hostile action to disperse this mob!"

"You can't do that!"

"We have our rights!"

"Who cares? Hang him!"

Harry sighed. This was their last chance. "If you surrender now, only charges of rioting will be brought against you!" he told them. "However, should you refuse and not surrender immediately, you will be treated as terrorists as delineated by the Terrorism Act of the year 2000!"

This time, he was met with derisive laughter.

"Dream on, Potter!" one of the men at the front sneered at him. "We're not afraid of you! Once we get our hands on you, you'll be begging us to die!"

Harry's shoulders visibly slumped in resignation, though his true feelings of remorse for what he was about to do didn't even come close to matching the act. Still, it would sound better when Captain Doherty and the others were debriefed if it sounded like Harry had done his best to convince the crowd to peacefully disperse and then only reluctantly gave the order to fire. He saw a single spell come at him then and easily dodged it by shifting his head to the side. The mob had just given him his cassus belli.

"You leave me no choice, then," he whispered softly, his voice-magnifying magic dispelled, as he reached for his earpiece with his left hand and tapped it. "Frontal section, open fire."

The sudden show of brutal force took the mob by surprise and many of the front-most wizards and witches fell to the sudden barrage of bullets that ripped into them. Instinct quickly took over, however, as the mages rallied and began to wave their wands in Harry's general direction, which he countered by bringing both his arms to his sides

and sliding into a crouched ready stance (no need to give the enemy a bigger target).

The moment the first spell flew from the mob, Harry was ready and quickly snapped a shield into existence a few feet in front of him. To his relief, not many of the spells were of any significant power, but the stress on the shield did become enough that he let it dissipate—lest it drain his reserves—and quickly snapped a second one into existence just behind it, successfully stopping the first volley of spell fire.

Quickly, he raised a hand to his earpiece and clicked it. "Rooftops, open fire!" he ordered briskly before again snapping shields into place as the spells kept coming his way. The rate at which they came quickly fell, however, as Doherty and the other sections on the rooftops suddenly made themselves known and opened fire on the mob below.

The sudden distraction finally gave Harry the time he needed to concentrate for his offensive spells—which quickly made him realize that he wasn't used to the rapid-fire nature of wizard combat. Raising his right hand—his dominant hand—he snapped his fingers at the mob, whispering "Ardere" as he did so.

Tongues of flames shot out from the magical spark he'd created with the motion and raced towards the mob, catching the more distracted members off guard as the fire consumed them. It wasn't the most effective spell at taking down large quantities of people, he knew, but he wasn't going to risk using Fiendfyre in the middle of goddamn London, either.

That didn't mean he had no other spells in his repertoire, however. Snapping his fingers on both hands while aiming at the ground beneath the front-most wizards and witches in front of him, Harry cast a Reductor spell that blasted many a mage into their comrades, causing further confusion and allowing the rooftop sections to have an easier time picking off the distracted targets.

Some of the mob tried to flee back the way they came, only to be met by another section of Irish Rangers that, as per his orders, had come down from the rooftops and flanked the mob while they weren't looking. The resulting scenario was that of a simple, effective kill box. Forced to look every which way for danger,

compounded by lack of training in working as a unit, and also just freaking out by the amount of damage the Muggles and their treacherous commander were causing, the wizards and witches were quickly falling into all out panic.

It wasn't long, then, before the first popping sounds reached Harry's ears, signalling someone Disapparating. Soon after that, it took maybe five minutes before the survivors from the mob had all vanished, leaving their wounded and dead behind.

Harry crinkled his nose at the sight. There were bodies all around the area where they had managed to box them in. Even from just eyeballing it, he could tell there were at least twenty bodies and many more wounded. He sighed once again and then lifted his hand to touch his earpiece.

"All units assemble for post-action procedure ASAP," he ordered, ignoring the confirmations that followed as he kept his gaze on the fracas before him.

A part of him truly did regret what he had just done, but at the same time, he knew it had been necessary. The Ministry had to have known the impact the riots were having, and yet they had decided not to intervene, as a form of passive aggressive protest against the government's decision. Only, as a Ministry, they had no legal right to withhold protection of the innocent over a squabble with 10 Downing Street and Westminster. By putting down the riots, Harry knew the Prime Minister's position had been empowered, as he had proven that there was no need for a special, wizard police to deal with rogue mages if one simply used the correct tactics.

Tactics, he was grimly reminded, that would have proven useful to the guards who'd been escorting him to the Ministry before getting ambushed by the Death Eaters.

London, United Kingdom, May 23rd, 2010 (D-Day +482)…

Harry's long-awaited reunion with William, Sirius (the real one, anyway), John, and Elicia finally came the next day as Colonel Livingston passed on the news that the Ministry, though unspeakably outraged at the massacre of the previous day, had been finally cowed into grudging silence. Reports from Sirius'

sources even indicated that the charges against him had been formally dropped.

Clearly, the body count had served to frighten the crap out of the Ministry, whose long supposition of outright mage superiority now needed desperate rethinking.

Thus freed from the threat of incarceration, Sirius and the others had flown down to London on a regional flight the very next day in the afternoon and had all but stormed Harry's loft as they sought to congratulate their friend/sibling/nephew/lover.

Elicia had been particularly demonstrative of her affection for him, having tackled him the moment he had opened the door and smothering his face with elated kisses. John, his pregnant fiancée, and Sirius laughed at the scene, while William gave his older brother a look of approval.

Not even the typically sobering news that the body count of the previous day had been finalized at 25 dead, 39 wounded managed to lower their spirits as they celebrated their long-awaited reunion.

Harry, with Elicia firmly planted on his lap and cuddled into his neck, felt particularly happy about seeing his loved ones again. He had, naturally, introduced himself charmingly enough to John's fiancée as to make the poor girl blush (eliciting a mockingly jealous comment of a rather rude nature from John), had wormed out of Sirius the identity of the Michael White persona who'd given the interview (Sirius' double, apparently), congratulated his little brother for the brilliant idea of using a PR campaign to get him out of jail, and then proceeded to challenge John and Elicia to a drinking contest, for old times' sake.

The fact that they'd never actually had a drinking contest before, as pointed out by William, never really registered with the reunited trio. Nor did the fact that Elicia was still quite happily sitting on his lap while they drank themselves into a happy stupor register as a bad idea to Harry at the time.

At least, not until she passed out from the booze and slumped against him, causing him to overturn his glass and pour it on her skirt, which in turn woke her up again and, in drunken confusion,

caused her to slam down her hands and push herself off of his lap, with one hand coincidentally aimed firmly at his family jewels.

Needless to say, John and Sirius were left howling with laughter as Harry doubled over and whimpered at the unintentionally savage attack on his person, while Elicia looked around confusedly. Despite that particular setback, however, the group did have fond (albeit blurred) memories of the night.

The next morning, in fact, Elicia came out to the kitchen (having spent the night in the master bedroom with Harry while the others divvied up the apartment for sleeping arrangements) to find Harry happily humming a tune as he cooked breakfast.

"Well, you sound positively jolly," she grumbled as she stumbled her way to a seat, her hangover figuratively killing her.

"Good morning to you too, sunshine!" Harry greeted her jovially, ignoring the sarcasm in her tone. "I've got the usual: eggs, bacon, and toast."

"Ugh, no thanks…got any—"

"It's in the fridge," he told her, pre-empting her request. "I made some of your hangover cure the moment I got here, since I knew you'd be looking for some and I don't really want to have to clean the kitchen after you make it," he told her with a grin.

"Bite me, White," she grumbled on instinct, slowly trudging over to the refrigerator and pulling out the foul-looking concoction that she swore was the cure for all hangovers.

She didn't manage to get further than the refrigerator door, however, before she felt Harry's arms circle her waist and his head lean onto the crook of her neck.

"I missed you," he whispered. "So damn much."

Elicia, despite the killer hangover she had, smiled genuinely as she closed her eyes and leaned back into his embrace, her free hand coming up to his cheek. "I missed you too," she told him sincerely.

No further words needed to be said between the two as they just stood there, content in each other's presence. Even drunk beyond comprehension the previous night, they had not given in to their lust and had settled for simply sleeping with each other peacefully—which probably explained why Harry had so much energy at this time of day.

"It feels weird to say this," Elicia spoke up after a moment. "But I'm kinda glad we broke up."

She felt Harry tense up. "Oh?" he asked neutrally.

"It's not like that!" she chastised him softly. "Remember when you got found out? Two of those…dark wizard catchers, I think Sirius called them, came to me because of our relationship in high school."

Elicia felt Harry's hug at her midriff tighten ever so subtly. Clearly, he was not pleased with this information. "Of course, I told them I didn't know where you were," she continued, ignoring the tense grip he had on her. "and I think the reason they bought it was because I could honestly say we had broken up over ideological differences."

"I don't understand," Harry confessed after a moment, his grip loosening only a fraction.

She gently reached up to pat his cheek, a smile on her face. "I told them I broke up with Francis White, which we did, remember?" she reminded him. "Not that I was seeing Harry Potter."

Elicia grinned when she heard him chuckle in amusement.

"A cunning interpretation of events, love," he praised her, his grip now completely devoid of the angry tension it had been sporting. "I knew I made the right choice with you."

She gave a playful snort of derision. "Please. I picked you, remember?"

This time, Harry burst out into laughter.

London, United Kingdom, May 30th, 2010 (D-Day +489)…

As with all things regarding life, however, the laughter had to end sooner or later.

Unfortunately for Harry, the laughter ended sooner.

Barely a week after he had put down the riot, he had been called to the Ministry of Defence to give a brief overview of the training program he'd be teaching to new military mages when a haggard-looking man burst into Colonel Livingston's office, disrupting the entire presentation.

"There's been an attack!" the man cried out, his expression a mix of horror, outrage, and helplessness.

So disrupted, the meeting abruptly ended as everyone in the room, including Harry and Colonel Livingston, rushed to the man's side and demanded details. Getting the man to calm down enough to speak had been a chore in and of itself, however, as the man seemed traumatized by whatever he had seen or heard (at present, they had no idea how he knew there even was an attack!).

Eventually, however, they did manage to get him to explain himself, having offered him a seat and a glass of water (mixed in with a little scotch for the nerves).

"The news just came in downstairs," the man finally gasped out. "A few tube stations got hit by massive explosions. Everyone's scrambling to deal with the situation!"

Harry blinked at the news. That was incredibly odd, given that the only enemy the UK was presently actively fighting were the Spanish, and their Wartime Measures ensured that immigration into the island was borderline impossible at the moment.

"What else?" he asked roughly, feeling there were more details missing from the man's report.

"…I don't know how accurate this is, but from what they've been saying, skull-shaped clouds were found in the sky above the incident areas," he added a little nervously, hoping not to be disparaged by the comment.

Harry blanched, recognizing the symbol described easily, given his prior study of the Death Eater movement at a time when he'd been determined to understand the cult that had nearly ended his family's lives. "A skull?" he repeated weakly. "With a snake coming from its mouth, maybe?"

The man looked at Harry bewilderedly. "How did you know?" he asked.

Harry groaned and palmed his face, having understood who the perpetrators were. "Death Eaters," he hissed out angrily. "Death Eaters did this."

"Who are these Death Eaters?" demanded the colonel irritably, disliking the feeling of being in the dark.

"Mage terrorists," Harry summed up. "All of them either borderline or totally psychopathic. Racists, too, and with a penchant for extreme violence against those who don't use magic or aren't human."

"…aren't human?" one of the officers who'd been attending the meeting asked weakly, though he was ignored by Harry and Livingston, who were both quite focused on the graver matter at hand.

"Can we expect more attacks of this kind to happen?" asked Livingston.

Harry nodded. "Sadly so, sir," he confirmed. "They're not ones to just hit a few tube stations and then run—they'll be looking for a big hit, now that they've caught our attention."

"When?" asked the Colonel, anxiety permeating his expression.

Harry shrugged impotently. "There's no way to tell," he admitted grudgingly. "Could be two weeks, or even a minute from now. All we can really be sure of, however, is that their big hit will come at a time of great significance to us."

"Wait, isn't today when the House of Commons meets for PMQ?" asked one of the audience members, horror creeping into his tone. "That's almost a guarantee for a full house!"

Harry's eyes bulged as he realized the man was correct. "Dear god…and the House of Lords…aren't they in the middle of a second reading for a rather important bill?" he added with growing dread.

Livingston was quick to catch on and pointed at a Lieutenant that had come to view Harry's presentation. "Go find any of the generals and tell him we've got an emergency!" he ordered. "Tell them the entire government, even the Crown, is in danger of a mage terrorist attack, and we've got to mobilize to contain the threat!"

The lieutenant in question nodded and quickly ran out of the office, leaving the panicked crowd inside Livingston's office to their worries.

"Where else are they likely to strike?" demanded Livingston as he wheeled to stare at his subordinate.

Harry quickly brought up all the relevant information on the Death Eaters he'd studied in the past. "From the way they've fought in the previous mage civil war, they'll go for high-ranking government officials and those likely to be the biggest threats to them. In their case, the dark wizard catchers known as Aurors and prominent Ministry loyalist families," he recounted. "In our case…I would suppose that would translate into our police and our…armed…forces…" he said with growing realization. "Oh, fuck me!" he swore. "This entire building's a bloody target!"

Livingston swore and quickly went to his desk, snatched up his phone, and dialled the lobby. "This is Colonel Howard Livingston," he barked into the phone. "I am informing this facility of the great probability that we are a target for a mage terrorist bombing. Initiate evacuation protocol immediately!"

Meanwhile, Harry tried to keep his nerves under control as his mind feverishly worked at trying to dissect how the Death Eaters' plans would unfold. Would they hit Parliament first? The MOD? The Crown, perhaps? Would they go after police stations or more subway stations to cripple their transportation?

"White, let's go!" Livingston yelled at him as he strode out the office door, having already been preceded by the rest of Harry's former audience. "If those poxy sons of bitches really want to blow this place up, I'd rather we're not in it when it happens!"

Merely nodding wordlessly, Harry followed after his superior, quickly making their way down the hallways of the MOD as they headed for the staircase. On the way there, he felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket and drew it out. Seeing his home caller ID, he flipped open the phone and blocked his other ear out with a finger, as the whiny noise of the general alarm was sounded throughout the building.

"Hello?" he shouted into the mouthpiece.

"Harry? What the hell is going on?" he heard Elicia cry out. "We just turned on the news and found out there's been bombings at Trafalgar and Soho!"

"I know!" Harry replied loudly as he jumped a few stairs to keep up with his superior's brisk pace. "Tell Sirius that I think the Death Eaters are behind this! He'll explain everything!"

"Why can't you? And what the hell is that noise?"

"General alarm, sweetheart!" he told her bluntly. "Turns out, the MOD is one big target, too!"

"WHAT?"

Harry actually had to remove the phone from his ear at the amazingly loud shriek Elicia had given upon finding out that her beloved was currently in a building marked for terrorist demolition.

"Tell Sirius to explain!" he repeated. "I have to go, Ellie! I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Harry! Please be careful!"

Harry smiled. "Always, love," he answered gently before shutting the phone.

Harry and quite a bit of the MOD staff were reaching the final stairway to the lobby at this point, and Livingston afforded his subordinate a curious glance.

"Everything alright, White?" he asked gruffly.

Harry nodded. "As well as can be—"

Then, with a sudden, violent shudder and a loud noise reminiscent of a super-tanker exploding, Harry's whole world went white, then dark as his consciousness slipped away, one last thought passing through his mind before he then knew no more.

The Death Eaters had hit the Ministry of Defence first.

Post-A/N: As a final note, I may or may not change the last scene in the future. I'm not quite satisfied with how it was written, which, considering that it was done so at 4:30 AM and I'm sick to my stomach, is already there only by sheer miracle.

Also, concerning the Roy Mustang association with Harry: while I admit being inspired by Roy Mustang's neat little fire alchemy for Harry's form of wandless magic, this chapter should make it clear that he does not only use fire spells-he is simply more proficient with them due to their practicality while on a battlefield. Furthermore, the next chapter and elements of all the ones currently posted should show that his personality is much more ruthless than that of Roy.

Also, still not apologizing for the long chapters. :P

EDIT: Holy crap I made a big mistake. As one helpful anonymous reviewer pointed out, I accidentally bumped Harry down one rank in this chapter. This has now been fixed. His correct 'canon' rank is Lieutenant Colonel, for future reference.

London, United Kingdom, June 7th, 2010 (D-Day +487)…

It was almost surreal how quickly his life had been turned upside down, Harry mused in his hospital bed.

Just eight days ago, he had been the Lieutenant Colonel responsible for bringing down a highly dangerous mob of wizard extremists on one of their rampages through London as a result of his Parliamentary pardon, and now he was (still) a Lieutenant Colonel lying down in a hospital bed as the doctors fawned over him, stunned by the fact that he was even still alive after having been caught up in the terrorist attack on the Ministry of Defense.

Well, former Ministry of Defense.

As it turned out, the Death Eaters out to hurt him and the government that sheltered him had hit the Ministry hard. Unlike typical terrorist bombings, this one had essentially blown out the Ministry building entirely, leaving only a few walls standing and the rest lying on the ground in a pile of rubble. It was underneath said rubble that he had been found, in fact. According to what the doctors had told him, they'd found him unconscious near a group of survivors who swore that he'd done something with his "freaky magic thing" to keep the rubble from killing them.

Harry glanced at his hands, ignoring the doctors still babbling excitedly. They were wrapped in bandages and coated in soothing burn relief cream.

When they'd told him of what he'd done in a half-conscious state, he had been easily able to connect the dots of the event and postulated that he'd employed accidental magic to keep himself and the others safe. For a wandless mage who enjoyed using his hands as the natural conduit of his magic, unfortunately, the amount of magic he had to release at once without control had caused severe burns on his hands.

It was amusing, in a way. The doctors had all been more worried about his broken legs, though Harry had insisted he would be fine if all they did was just set the bones in place. True to his word, once informed his bones had indeed been set in place from the very beginning, he brought up his bandaged right hand and, with a

tremulous, pained snap cast the Femur Emendo spell, causing the bones to mend while taking great care to concentrate enough so he wouldn't mess up and accidentally vanish his bones instead.

Unfortunately, he then promptly passed out for another day as the pain of using magic through the burned hand wracked his body.

Still, it was quite the commotion when he woke up again, surrounded by astounded doctors who had watched him crush every bit of medical knowledge they had sworn to be true in a matter of a single second. The revelation of a whole new range of medical ingredients and methodologies had served to wet their intellectual appetites enormously, and it was only the promise of copies of these newly revealed manuscripts that had managed to get the doctors off his back.

One thing that did surprise him was the fact that he had actually held back on letting his loved ones know he was conscious again. It confused him for a while, even as he ordered one of his guards to let his superiors know, until the reason finally hit him as Colonel Livingston and a gaggle of other officers entered his room, all of them looking rather haggard but still quite alive.

He simply did not want to be seen in a moment of weakness by those he held dearest. It was laughable, certainly, as one would think such reservation would be employed towards his superiors and subordinates instead of those he trusted most, but this was not the case.

His superiors had to see he wasn't infallible and invincible so they would exercise caution and not use him as a solve-all tool, but his loved ones did not need to see this as well, because all it would do is make them less open to his execution of dangerous plans. They would get to see him once most of his injuries were cleared up.

"Lieutenant Colonel, good to see you up and about," greeted Livingston as he led the small group of recovering officers into the room. "How are you feeling?"

Pleasantries first, Harry presumed. "Weary, but fine overall, sir," he said by way of greeting with a tired smile—it wasn't that hard to conjure up, either, given that he did feel a little tired. He analyzed the faces of the men and women accompanying his superior with a

critical eye. "Sir, no disrespect intended, but may I know who you've brought to my room?"

Livingston nodded and motioned to the small group behind him. "These are the majority of the surviving officer corps of the British Armed Forces, barring those already in the field in Spain," he explained dejectedly.

Harry blinked at the information. There hadn't been that many officers in the Ministry of Defense to begin with, so how was it possible for this many to constitute the majority? Unless…

"London wasn't the only city to be attacked, was it?" he asked shrewdly, eyes narrowed in realization.

"Correct," one of the attending officers, a Lieutenant whose right eye was covered by a bloodied bandage, confirmed. "The attacks were launched on every major Army, Navy, and Air Force base in the isles."

"They hit us hard, White," Livingston summed up as he took a seat next to Harry's bed. "And they were smart about it, too. Our chain of command has been irrevocably damaged; most of the generals were at the Ministry just for work, and a few more were conducting training exercises at said military bases."

"We're still wondering how they knew where to hit us, however," one of the few women in the group, a blonde wearing Captain insignia, spoke up. "It seems unlikely that there were leaks within the system—most of the men are, at best, wary of magic and mages."

Harry didn't have to conduct a poll to know that was true. "It was the massacre," he guessed.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Livingston blankly.

"The mage massacre we conducted at Charring Cross and Shaftesbury," he clarified. "When they were rioting, remember? A few of them survived—no doubt extremist sympathizers. They probably reported what they saw and their leaders made the appropriate research."

"Their leaders? This so-called Ministry of Magic?" asked a Major indignantly. "So this is all about a coup?"

Harry shook his head, but it was Livingston who spoke up in his stead. "The Lieutenant Colonel informed me just prior to the attack that the Ministry wasn't the one behind the attacks, but rather a terrorist cell called the Death Eaters," he explained. "Your average malcontents with the tools to make things explode."

"Except their tools are, in theory, limitless," Harry cut in. "Given the appropriate rotational schedule, it is conceivable that a single group of five Death Eaters could have done most of the damage we witnessed today."

The pallor that beset the group then told him his point had been made as to the versatility and danger of a renegade mage. "The Ministry has been fighting these people for a while now," he added. "But for the most part, they've managed to keep a lid on this fight in order not to frighten their populace."

"How did you know, then?" asked Livingston.

No use for secrets at this point. "My parents have been cultivating informers in the Ministry for over a decade now," he explained. "In terms of operational secrecy structures, their entire hierarchy has been compromised by our agents. We know every move they make and will make, sometimes even before most of their own people do."

"And you couldn't warn us of this attack why?" demanded an angry Colonel. "Were you in league with them! Did it amuse you to watch us normal folk die at the hands of your kind?"

"Jefferson, calm down!" Livingston warned his colleague as he got up. "You are way out of line!"

Harry shook his head. "No, sir, he has every right to be angry at me—in fact, I'm angry at myself right now as well," he admitted. "For all our resources, we were unable to even predict this attack on our government. The guilt is on myself and my family, I'm afraid."

One of the officers scoffed—a brunette woman wearing the three pips of a Brigadier General and her right arm in a sling. "Feeling guilty is all well and good, Colonel White, but it doesn't solve our

immediate problem. Livingston, please inform your subordinate of the severity of the situation we are facing."

Livingston nodded at his superior, turning to face Harry with a dejected and defeated look. "The Armed Forces were hit hard, that's true, but it's not all that got hit," he told Harry. "Parliament took a beating as well. Both Houses were going through full sessions when the attacks started. Fortunately, a few survived, either through dumb luck or by being late or absent, so we've still got a few MPs in both Houses running around."

Livingston took a deep breath, ignoring the stunned expression on his subordinate's face. "The Prime Minister is dead, as are the cabinet members. Normally, that would just be solved by having Parliament elect a new Prime Minister, but with our current situation…that may not be possible," he explained before looking a little more dejected. "The Crown…"

"Let me guess," Harry cut in softly. "Taken out to a man?"

"Almost," confirmed the Brigadier. "One of the princes survived, if you can call it that."

"What do you mean, ma'am?" asked Harry cautiously.

"The prince, or our King now, I suppose, is quadriplegic," Livingston informed him. "He can talk, he can think, he has limited movement of the arms, but beyond that, he's confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life."

"Any chance of heirs?" asked Harry, dreading the answer.

The Brigadier shook her head. "None. The P—King," she corrected herself, "was severely injured in the attack. That he's able to do this much is already a miracle."

Harry brought up his hands to his face and covered it as he finally showed the extent of his frustration and tiredness. Nothing was going his way anymore. None of this was supposed to ever happen! It was supposed to be a straight shot up the military ladder, then a political campaign for the position of Prime Minister, and then the Ministry would be off his family's back! None of this…absurd turn of events was supposed to happen!

How had he lost control so catastrophically?

"The reason we're even informing you of this, Colonel White," the Brigadier continued, seemingly uncaring of Harry's mental anguish, "is because out of everyone left, you and your uncle are the only ones who know how these mages operate. We've already initiated countermeasures to contain the political and civil fallout, but we don't know how to proceed in regards to the perpetrators or the Ministry."

Harry kept his face covered throughout the explanation, his mind awhirl. He wanted to break down, just tell them he hadn't a damned clue how best to proceed. He wanted to rant and rave at how the Ministry and the damned Death Eaters had ruined everything he had carefully planned most of his life, and wanted to abandon all duty just to drown in his self-pity.

The officers seemed to understand this, as Livingston and the Brigadier exchanged a look while Harry wasn't looking. Sniffing condescendingly, the brunette Brigadier gave her subordinates a stern glare that succeeded in getting them to leave the room, with Livingston being the last one to go, having stayed back to put a comforting hand on his anguished subordinate's shoulder. Once the graying man had left, the Brigadier shut the door behind him and turned to give Harry a disappointed and revolted glare.

"After the attack, when Colonel Livingston told me you were a mage, I was of a mind to have you shot," she told him icily, ignoring the fact that he wasn't paying visual attention to her. "He vouched for you—said you were a good man and a loyal soldier; that your former superiors were full of praises for your gallant conduct. But you know what I see?" she asked angrily.

"I see a whipped dog!" she reprimanded him. "I see a little boy who thought he could deal with the real world and just found out he was being arrogant beyond belief! So you had a plan, big deal!" she snorted when his head shot up and stared at her perplexedly. "Oh please, you think you're the only one who guides their life with a plan? I know your type, White. You plan every little thing, you always make the choice with the biggest profit, and if something goes wrong, you panic. You want my advice, White? As the saying goes, grow a pair."

Harry was taken aback by the woman's rude and frank rebuke. He certainly hadn't been expecting this. He even flinched when she stormed up to him and poked him roughly in the forehead.

"Everyone loves to throw around a cliché whenever they make speeches, White, and most of them are shite," she continued. "But here's one that is true: no plan ever comes out intact after first contact with the enemy. If you hit a roadblock, you suck it up and plan around it or through it, White, because that's what good officers do!"

Harry remained silent as the woman chastised him, quietly listening as she verbally tore him a new one for his reticence. "Civilians get to freeze when things go wrong, White, because their lives don't hang in the balance. Us? We don't get that luxury," she reminded him. "If we freeze, good men and women die, and that stays on your conscience until the day you die. So when something goes wrong and the plan hits a snag, you man up and find a way through it or around it, but you never stop planning!"

The Brigadier took a step back then, finally removing her face from inches in front of Harry's. "I lost a lot of friends today, White, and I'm sure you have too. I'm sure Livingston will be attending a lot of funerals in the coming days, as will your uncle. But you know what? They're dead, and we're not. You want to make their deaths count for something? Man up, tell us how to proceed regarding the Ministry and the Death Eaters, and then get out of this bloody bed and get back in the fight."

The Brigadier fell silent after that, and Harry guessed she had decided to observe his reaction. Whatever she saw didn't seem to please her, however, as she walked towards the door with a condescending sniff and made to leave. Only once the door was slightly ajar did she stop, causing Harry to look up slightly.

"If you ever decide you want to become the man everyone seems to think you are, tell Livingston to call me so we can have a chat about your future," she told him seriously. "This is a whole new world now, White, and while I have no time for cowards, I could use a few good men."

With that said, the woman threw open the door and walked out, leaving the surprised guards outside looking in to see what on earth had just happened to make the Brigadier throw open the door.

All they saw was the narrow-eyed, pondering expression of their charge, one hand cupping his chin as he stared down at his covers.

London, United Kingdom, June 11th, 2010 (D-Day +491)…

Four days had passed since the Brigadier had walked out on him after having chastised him like a child, and Harry had finally allowed for his loved ones to know he was able to see visitors.

In the intermittent time between his actual return to consciousness and this day, he had used his magic to accelerate his recovery where he could, taking great care in avoiding the use of his hands as the conductor of the magic. Due to his magical burns there and the excruciating pain it caused him to channel magic into them, he had decided to forego trying to magically heal them and instead let them do so naturally, which, although slow, would finish eventually. Until then, however, he resorted to using gloves to cover the extent of the burns.

His other injuries, having no such impediment towards magical treatment, had quickly healed since his rebuke, and by the time his loved ones arrived at his hospital room, the only indications of any injuries on his person were the bandage wrapped around his head and the gloves on his hands.

The reunion among friends felt oddly…strange to Harry. Elicia, having been the last person to talk to him, was strangely enough not the first to get to his side, instead hanging back while John rushed to give his wounded friend a manly hug, Sirius patted him on the shoulder, and William just took a seat next to his bed and nodded at him with a neutral smile. Even after the men had been done with their enthusiastic greetings, she did not advance towards him, apparently settling for staring at him piercingly, as though he were an interesting puzzle to figure out.

It sort of reminded him of her younger days; when he'd first met her, in fact.

Nonetheless, she did not move forward towards him during the entire visit, something that Harry knew the others had noticed as well but had chosen not to comment on. It wasn't until William had discreetly motioned for them to leave that the two had been left alone to talk out whatever obviously needed talking about.

In fact, the moment the door had clicked close, Harry spoke up, a wary expression on his face.

"You're strangely silent, Ellie," he observed. "Something on your mind?"

Still she did not speak. Still her eyes gazed upon him as though he were an experiment. The good memories of her youth were gone now, and all that the look elicited in Harry was increasing caution.

"You nearly died," she finally spoke up, immediately grabbing his attention.

Harry snorted. "Obviously not. Practically no wounds, see?" he refuted, showing off his healthy body.

She tilted her head slightly to the side. "You're lying to me," she noted calmly. "You swore you would never do that again."

"I'm not lying," he pressed between gritted teeth. "I'm fine."

"Then why were you out of contact for over a week?" she asked. Still her tone had not changed. Still calm, still scientifically neutral.

"Rubble knocked me out," he argued, pointing to his remaining head bandage.

"And yet while your head gets hit, no other part of your body does?" she asked archly. "Why are you wearing gloves?" she then asked in a seeming non-sequitur.

"…magical burns," he told her truthfully. "I apparently did quite a bit of accidental magic just before getting knocked unconscious."

She nodded. "At least now you're telling me the truth," she noted. "Harry, why are you lying to me about nearly dying?"

"I'm not!" he insisted. "I'm fine!"

"BUT YOU WEREN'T A WEEK AGO!" she suddenly yelled, surprising him.

"E-Ellie…"

"You nearly died, Harry!" she said accusingly as she stormed up to him and poked him in the chest. "You nearly died and what's worse, you're lying to us about it! Why? Why are you lying to us…to me about this?" she demanded.

"Does it matter?" he asked hotly. "It's in the past, Ellie! I didn't die, I'm fine now, so let's get on with our lives, okay?"

She pushed him back onto his pillows roughly. "Of course it's not okay, you inconsiderate berk!" she snapped back. "Harry, we were beside ourselves with worry for the past week! We thought you were dead for sure! And here you are now, obviously healed up nice and proper, and you're trying to pass yourself off as Superman! Why, Harry?"

"Does it matter?" he asked again, his eyes narrowed in defiance.

"It does to me, Harry!" she told him firmly. "What did you think I would think after seeing you? That you couldn't be taken from me? That, what, you could survive anything?" she speculated.

Right on the nail, just as he'd expected of his intellectual soul mate.

"Harry, don't you think I know by now that you're still very human and very fallible?" she pressed on. "We've had wonderful years together, true, but you still mucked it up sometimes! I know this better than…well…probably anyone at this point!"

"You'd protest," he told her quietly, his gaze softening.

She sniffed, wiping away tears with her thumbs. "You're damned right I'd protest!" she confirmed, having easily made the logical connections from his statement. "I'd fight you over and over again to prevent you from taking stupid risks, but God above, Harry, I know you! I know that if you're really set on something, you'll do it no matter what I say!"

"I'm not that stubborn," he protested weakly, knowing full well he indeed was.

She scoffed disbelievingly. "Right, and I'm the bloody Queen of England!" she exclaimed. "The point is, Harry, don't lie to me in some stupid display of machismo. I knew full well what I was getting into when I agreed to be yours, so don't shut me out like this."

"This was for your own peace of mind," he informed her with a small, resigned smile.

"I'd rather fret, thank you very much," she countered with her own small smile. "Gives me a better grasp of reality that way."

"Scientists!" he exclaimed exasperatedly.

She playfully conked him on the shoulder for the comment before giving him a true smile. "Shut it, you," she admonished him. "Now then, what's my brilliant lover got in mind to deal with this rather interesting situation?"

Harry didn't even need to ask how she knew he'd been plotting again. After that rebuke, he gathered she probably knew him even better than he'd previously thought. It was both an endearing thought and a terrifying one. Instead of questioning her, he just smiled conspiringly at her.

"I need you to find an officer called Colonel Livingston," he told her. "Tell him to pass on the message that I have a plan, then get Sirius and William in here."

"Can I at least watch the super-secret meeting you'll no doubt be having?" she asked sarcastically.

Harry grinned up at her. "You know I could never say no to you."

She smiled and leaned down to kiss him on the cheek. "That's my man."

London, United Kingdom, June 14th, 2010 (D-Day +492)…

"I hear you've grown a pair, White."

Harry smiled politely as he watched the brusque Brigadier who'd chewed him out seven days ago walk into the room. It was still quite the marvel to him to see such a crude woman so high up in the ranks, but none of this even began to compare to the surprise he felt when he saw the woman sporting the insignia of a full General.

He quickly rallied, however, and kept up his smile. "I see congratulations are in order, Madame General," he said politely.

The brunette glanced down at her epaulets and sniffed condescendingly. "Decorating cloth, nothing more," she said dismissively. "Rather than kiss my well toned arse, however, I'm more interested in hearing what you've got to say on our current predicament, White."

Harry couldn't help the easy grin that bloomed on his face as he heard quite a few men gasp at the rudeness of the senior officer. Harry, on the other hand, didn't mind it so much anymore. Compared to the strict formality others demanded, this new approach to command was…refreshing.

"General Curtis, please…" Harry could hear one of the woman's aides plead next to her.

"Oh, bugger off, Wilkins!" she snapped at the man. "This isn't some black tie event! I'll curse however I want to, damn it all!"

Harry couldn't help the chuckle that escaped his lips, noting that many an officer in attendance had frozen at his improper action. General Curtis' attention, too, seemed riveted on him now.

"Something funny, White?" she asked dangerously.

Harry was unfazed by the challenge. He believed he understood this woman now. The rudeness, the crude nature of her speech…it was mostly to measure how each subordinate would react. A spineless follower would just suck it up and/or try to change her mannerisms to protect her image and thus their position, but the men and women she was looking for had to be far more thick-skinned than that.

"I'm just relieved, ma'am," he told her with a smile. "If the General can show such spirits even in times of crisis like this one, then I am all the more sure that we can prevail."

The General's smile was just as dangerous as her tone. "Still kissing my arse, White?"

"Just stating facts, ma'am," he replied calmly.

"Explain."

Harry nodded. "With pleasure," he said with a smile before sweeping his gaze over the group and clearing his throat silently. "As we're all undoubtedly aware, most of our government is currently in shambles. Our Parliament has been virtually annihilated, the cabinet members are dead, and the institution that gave legitimacy to everyone else, the Crown, is now reduced to a single, disabled, and traumatized Prince."

General Curtis snorted. "If I wanted to crush everyone's spirits, White, I'd have done it myself," she snarked.

Harry's easy demeanour did not change. "This wasn't meant to dampen anyone's spirits, General," he countered. "On the contrary, it is just a basic outlining of our situation. The real analysis comes now. Uncle?" he said, looking to his side.

The sombre-looking Parliamentarian nodded and clasped his hands behind his back. "According to the Potter family sources within the Ministry of Magic, there's been a lot of discussion regarding the possibility of taking over the non-magical government now that we stand at our weakest state," he informed the small group. "So far, our agents have been running a lot of interference in the discussions, but even with its typical slowness, the Ministry is expected to come to a decision very soon."

"How soon?" demanded Curtis.

Sirius shrugged. "Two weeks at best. One, at worst," he speculated.

"What about the Death Eaters?" asked someone in the group. "They did this to us, shouldn't we be focusing our energies on finding them and bringing them to justice?"

"The Death Eaters are undoubtedly satisfied by this act of bloody vengeance on us," Harry answered. "Even if they weren't, the strategic planning necessary to harm us even further would require time—time which we can use to deal with the more pressing matter of the Ministry's plans to absorb the remainder of our government."

"You think they'll definitely try?" asked Curtis interestedly.

Harry nodded. "There's no way they'll pass up the opportunity to impose their own power structure on us now that they've seemingly been offered a legitimate reason to do so," he analyzed. "Even the most extremist Wizard would vote for such a move, as the current legal framework in place in the magical community ensures that those unable to use magic are second class citizens."

"Leaving us at the mercy of a system we could not then appeal to," Sirius added in. "Given enough preparation, they could use their magical abilities to suppress dissent as well; taking over the country would then not be such an arduous task."

"A chilling thought," agreed Curtis as she cupped her chin pensively.

"General, please give us the order to suppress this danger at once!" exclaimed one of the remaining military officers, soon echoed by his colleagues.

Curtis, however, kept her stare on Harry and Sirius. "Could we pull such a move off?" she asked.

"In theory, yes," Harry replied, thankful that between he, William, and Sirius, they had thought this through earlier. "However, the gains from such a move would be minimal compared to the losses."

"How so?" asked Curtis, noticing that the officers in the room had begun puffing up indignantly at Harry's unspoken supposition that he knew better than they.

Harry smiled calmly. "As I previously mentioned, the Death Eaters have undoubtedly had their appetites sated after this attack; however, this is not a permanent situation," he reminded the group. "A protracted war between our forces and the Ministry would simply allow these extremists to organize another strike to further weaken

us, in the hopes that by the end of our conflict with the Ministry, both sides would be ripe for the picking."

"A diminution tactic," Curtis summed up for him. "Wait until the two biggest opponents wear each other out and then use an intact force to wipe out whoever's left standing…" she turned her gaze on her subordinates. "Your hastiness would have proven costly indeed."

Harry knew he had to act quickly now. "My colleagues are merely anxious to find out who to fight," Harry interceded smoothly. "We are military men, and we have been attacked. Given that I have shot down the possibility of attacking either of our major foes, they have a right to feel that way."

Curtis gave him a shrewd smile. "Nice save, White," she commended him lightly. "Very well then, if not the Ministry or the Death Eaters, who should feel the brunt of our wrath?"

It was Harry's turn to give the group a cunning smile as he raised one finger. "The Spanish, of course," he said plainly.

Even Curtis started as Harry made his pronouncement. None of them had been expecting anyone to recommend keeping the war on the Iberian Peninsula going in this state of affairs.

"You can't be serious!" Curtis exclaimed disbelievingly. "With the sorry state the government is in? And the Ministry sniffing about like a pack of hyenas?"

"My nephew is deadly serious," Sirius spoke up. "So far, we've done a great job of keeping up appearances for the public, and the mass media is cooperating with us on damage control. Economically, we're bound to take a severe hit sooner or later, but for now we've managed to…convince the more prominent businesses to proceed normally. Furthermore, any stories or videos on the Internet regarding the extent of the damage done to London have been tracked down and eliminated by the government's best computer hackers, but that won't last. However, the longer we wait to give the appearance of everything being fine on the executive level, the harder it gets to retain popular ignorance. The moment we lose that, faith in our government would crumble. Fighting the Spanish is not something a weakened government would do, thus we must do it."

"When strong, appear weak; when weak, appear strong," Harry paraphrased. "All warfare is based on deception."

"Sun Tzu," Curtis recognized immediately. "You're saying we should use the war with Spain as a cover of our current governmental crisis?"

"Precisely," Harry confirmed, nodding. "Our military is the single branch of the government that has suffered the least casualties in these attacks correct?"

One of the officers nearest to Curtis—a Colonel—nodded. "The forces in Spain were not hit at all during the attacks," he reported to the crowd. "All of their command structures, except for those already KIA or MIA, have been accounted for."

"Then we, as the military, must keep up appearances for the government," Harry concluded. "Seeing it from an outside perspective, if five hundred thousand men suddenly pulled out of a war they were ostensibly winning, wouldn't it look mightily suspicious and weak?" he proposed. "Thus, in order to maintain a façade of stability, we must continue our war with Spain."

"But what about the Ministry? Or the Death Eaters?" insisted one of the more vengeful-sounding officers. "They should be brought to heel for what they've done!"

"Neither will be in any position to do anything should we proceed with my recommendation," Harry assured the man. "Firstly, the war with Spain would warn the two that we are still militarily ready and able. Secondly, it implies that there is a stable command structure capable of making government-level decisions."

"How would that deter the Ministry? The second reason, I mean," Curtis asked.

Harry glanced up to Sirius. "Uncle?"

Sirius nodded. "Most people like to think, with a great deal of good reason, that the Crown has been a symbolic institution for the past hundred years or so," he said. "While this is practically true on every level of government we're all familiar with, my friends the Potters have managed to unearth the crucial detail that it also happens to be

the hinging point of the agreement that formally created what is now the Ministry of Magic and its relation to the non-magical government."

"I don't follow," Curtis panned.

"The agreement between the Ministry of Magic and the Crown government of William Pitt the Elder stipulates that the Ministry of Magic is restricted from intervening in the governance of non-magical peoples so long as there is still a monarch enthroned," Sirius explained to the group. "Meaning that as long as there is a King who can appoint a Prime Minister, the Ministry of Magic cannot take over the our government."

"Couldn't they just disregard the treaty?" asked someone in the group.

Harry shook his head. "This is no normal treaty," he told them. "This was a magical treaty, with magical repercussions promised against those who would violate the agreement."

"What repercussions?" asked Curtis warily.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know them myself, but considering the importance of the situation the treaty was resolving, I imagine the repercussions against transgressors would be pretty dire," he speculated. "And it's not held against mages only, either. From what my uncle's informed me, we are unable to move against the Ministry of Magic so long as they remain loyal to the Crown."

"Meaning that we cannot pre-emptively attack them," Curtis finished the thought for him.

Harry smiled. "We won't have to," he told her. "If they throw the first blow without violating the agreement, which is possible, then we can act appropriately."

"They would still have the momentum," Curtis shot back.

"Not if we plan accordingly," Harry countered. "They are not an unstoppable force, General," he then smiled nastily. "But, with enough planning, we can become an immoveable object."

"And why do you think they'll be the first to break ties?" demanded another Colonel.

"It is only logical," Harry replied simply. "If we carry out the plan I have put forth before you, the Ministry would become aware of the fact that our power is barely diminished," he explained. "If the war with Spain concludes in our favour, that means that we would have a five hundred thousand-strong army comprised of veterans at the ready to unleash their vengeful fury upon those we blame for the attacks on London."

"And they'll assume it'll be them and not the Death Eaters?" guessed Curtis curiously.

"As far as we can honestly say, we have no idea who the Death Eaters are comprised of or where they are," he said with a conspiring smirk. "In fact, we have never had their existence independently confirmed, having only been informed of them via the Ministry's own channels. Given the fact that the Ministry has already proven itself to be, at best, reticent in stepping in when their mages get rowdy in non-magical locations, who's to say that these Death Eaters aren't just an excuse they use to justify why they're unable to crack down on rogue mages?"

"But we know they aren't," pointed out Curtis.

Harry nodded in agreement. "But the public doesn't know that," he countered. "The Ministry, whether it's in the short run or the long run, will eventually become our enemy. This is fact; their power structures and civil traditions are simply too obsolete and incompatible with the real world to coexist with ours. In fact, this is a problem that has already cropped up elsewhere, if I'm not mistaken."

The Colonel who'd relayed the news about the British forces in Spain nodded, and Harry got a feeling that this man was probably General Curtis' personal aide. "Individual governments have been good at keeping the internal strife a secret from the world, but we do know that there have been major uprisings in Cyprus, most of East and Central Africa, and throughout the ASEAN nations. There are rumours of mage-civilian strife in the Balkans, but no real confirmation one way or another, and the same applies to Central and South America," he reported.

"You see?" he noted to the group. "Our societies are too different for simple coexistence. Eventually, we would clash anyway—best to have a reason in mind for when it happen."

"What the Lieutenant Colonel has said rings true, General," noted her apparent aide. "My humble recommendation would be to follow through with his plan."

Curtis thumbed her chin pensively as she kept her piercing stare on the mage before her. Even lying on a bed as he was, she couldn't shake off the feeling that he was still probably more powerful than every other person in the room put together, which in turn confounded her. Why would such a powerful man side with normal people like herself? Sure, he seemed to have a grudge against the Ministry, but could he not have caused more trouble for them from within the segregated society rather than from without? Something just didn't seem right to her, but he had managed to present a coherent and plausible plan, and the other officers, from what she saw, had been swayed to his side through his seemingly impenetrable logic.

"I wonder if your plan is as foolproof as you make it out to be, White," she mused out loud with an amused smile. "But it's better than anything else we've got at this time, so we'll follow through with it," she declared as she lifted her uninjured arm and pointed at him with two fingers. "In fact, as of right now, you're being promoted to Brigadier, in charge of both continuing the mage recruitment program and coordinating the nation's strategy against the internal threats of the Death Eaters and the Ministry of Magic."

Her sudden pronouncement of his promotion stunned Harry. Had the government truly suffered such a blow that this woman sitting before him could arbitrarily dish out promotions like that?

Sirius, for his part, seemed calm about the pronouncement—too calm, in fact. "My nephew is speechless from his gratitude, General," he spoke up for him smoothly. "I will have my remaining colleagues ratify the promotion as soon as possible."

Curtis cast an unimpressed glance at Sirius before nodding. "Just make sure you pencil pushers understand that we need our new King enthroned ASAP," she warned him. "Field Marshal Anderson

may have delegated running the military here at home to me, but I don't have the power to crown a King."

Harry nodded absently, having now received the necessary information that explained why Curtis was acting as she pleased without reservations. She had apparently been appointed de facto leader of the Territorial forces.

Sirius put a hand over his heart and bowed ever so slightly in gentlemanly acknowledgement. "Of course, General," he said smoothly. "I will see to it that the process is expedited as quickly as possible."

The next few minutes essentially comprised of the necessary niceties as the group began to filter out of the room with Curtis at the lead, leaving Sirius and Harry alone in the room. Once the door closed, Sirius unclasped his hands and cupped his chin pensively as he stared at the door.

"That went well," he mused out loud.

Harry nodded wearily, the toll on his recuperating body finally hitting him. "Fortunately, it went better than expected," he noted. "I hadn't imagined that I'd get promoted, that's for sure."

"It serves us well," Sirius stated. "Independent command of the Military Mage program means that we incorporate the troops from Europe into a coherent regiment much quicker than we'd hoped."

"More importantly," Harry added, "the promotion gets me in the higher circles of planning."

"An area you excel in, apparently," Sirius noted amusedly. "The part about neutralizing the Ministry with the war in Spain was a nice touch, though I'm happy I was forewarned by our planning session, or else I might not have been much use as support."

"That's not my only plan," Harry stated then with a confident smile.

"I thought as much," Sirius spoke with a resigned, yet amused tone. "Should I be worried about collateral damage?"

"None," Harry told him confidently.

Sirius looked intrigued now. "Okay, you've got my interest; what's this big plan you've got?"

Harry leaned his head on a fist, his confident smile still stuck in place. "Wang Yun presents his daughter to court; infatuated Lu Bu slays Dong Zhuo for the Great Han," he spoke cryptically.

Sirius blinked, his expression blank. "I don't get it," he panned.

Harry laughed. "Look it up," he recommended. "When you do, you'll understand."

Bulford Camp, United Kingdom, June 15th, 2010 (D-Day +495)…

Harry had not been looking forward to this meeting ever since he'd first realized he'd have to have it.

"This wasn't part of the deal, human," snarled the leader of the goblin banker delegation sitting before him in his office. "Our involvement in this affair was supposed to be strictly confidential! Instead, the Ministry has been hounding us for explanations regarding the presence of goblin steel in the hands of the one person they hate more than that pathetic Dark Lord!"

Harry sighed. "I'm well aware of the straits this puts you in, Master Ranin," Harry spoke soothingly. "Believe me, it was not my intention to reveal our partnership in such an irresponsible fashion, but my hand was forced."

Ranin pointed at Harry with a crooked finger, his sharp features contorted in anger. "And yet irresponsible it was!" he seethed. "Now the Ministry is asking questions, and my superiors want to know what you have in mind to get us out of this problem!"

Well, on the bright side, at least he wasn't being threatened with having goblin support withdrawn. "There's already a plan in motion to divert the Ministry's attention, Master Ranin," Harry assured the banker. "It will take time to take effect, but I believe you should be fine until then."

The goblin snorted derisively. "That's it?" he asked with an ugly sneer. "You reveal to the Ministry our partnership in such a fashion

that we cannot deny it with any form of credibility, and all we're to do is take your word for it that a solution is in the works? Do you take us for fools, Mister Potter?"

Not fools, just greedy bastards, Harry mused. "Of course not, Master Ranin," he replied calmly. "The plan is quite simple: I intend to paralyze the Ministry by forcing them to initiate a witch hunt, so to speak, for insiders and leaks."

The goblin narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "How would that help us?" he asked dangerously.

"A Ministry that is unsure whom amongst themselves they can trust is incapable of functioning," Harry reasoned. "Thus, any investigations would have their credibility thrown into doubt, therefore allowing us to mire the proceedings against you in red tape while we continue carrying out the grand scheme."

The goblin envoy was silent as he listened to Harry explain his plan. He was silent for a few more moments after that as well, before finally speaking up again. "You intend to prey on the Minister's distrust towards Dumbledore and his hatred for Death Eaters," the goblin deduced with a nasty smile. "Very shrewd, Mister Potter; very clever."

"I do aim to please, Master Ranin," Harry said with a controlled, confident smile.

The goblin grinned toothily at him, giving Harry a full view of the creature's sharp teeth—it did not make for a pleasant sight. "Unfortunately, Mister Potter, that will not be enough," the goblin then added, surprising Harry.

"I beg your pardon?" Harry asked as he leaned forward in disbelief. He'd just handed them a get out of trouble for free card and they were asking for more?

"Whether your little plan works is, unfortunately, far too uncertain for our liking," Ranin explained silkily—or, at least, as silkily as a goblin could talk. "While I am overjoyed that you have not forgotten of our partnership, I'm afraid my superiors want greater assurances that the catastrophe in Spain will not occur again and in so doing jeopardize our position in this affair."

Harry narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the goblin—this neither sounded good nor sat well with him. "What does the Director want?" he asked bluntly.

The goblin grinned viciously. Undoubtedly, this was the game face he used for every business deal in which he had gotten the upper hand. "The Director understands that your little…revolution…demands funding, and we are glad to continue with our contributions, but on a conditional basis," he laid out. "Simply put, we want the ability to exercise a veto on any plan that we deem dangerous to the Goblin Nation. In addition to the veto, you will provide us with summaries of every plan you intend to take so that we may weigh the financial burdens ahead of time, rather than on the spot."

Harry had to control himself to avoid gaping openly. Before, the goblins, being fully aware that a leak of their partnership could spell their doom, had been content with remaining a silent, invisible partner in his plans. With this veto, however, he would have to essentially cater to them, on penalty of losing quite a bit of funding. Certainly, his parents, Sirius, and the Baron Warwick also funded his schemes, but the Goblins were a major source of income. Many of the bribes that Sirius had used to buy out the loyalty of many a Ministry employee were paid for by Goblin gold. The Goblins had been the ones to provide the smuggling route to get the disaffected mages out of the country for Military Mage training on the Continent. Hell, the Goblins were the ones who provided Sirius with up to date information about the financial comings and goings of the Ministry of Magic!

Now, with London reeling from Death Eater attacks and three quarters of the government wiped out, he would be needing their funding again just to help rebuild the nation's government!

And what was worse, they knew it.

"No veto, but I'll agree on the up to date plan summaries," Harry counter-offered.

Ranin narrowed his beady eyes. "Veto, and we'll forego the summaries."

Harry scoffed. "If you want the veto, Master Ranin, you'll need to pay blood for it," he warned him. "No veto and I lower the amount of funding you need to provide by a third and provide the summaries."

Ranin growled. "We get the veto, raise the funding provided by two thirds and forego the summaries."

Harry narrowed his eyes; it was a good counter offer, but it was missing something. "Fine; you get the veto, raise the funding by two thirds, and you give me access to one Goblin Honour Squad and you forego the summaries."

Ranin's growl turned into a full blown snarl. "Unthinkable!" he spat. "Those squads are there solely to protect the people of the Goblin Nation, not to fight a human's battles!"

"Giving you a veto on every major plan, Master Ranin, would put my people's well-being in your hands," Harry reminded him. "And considering our present situation, that means I'm putting a hell of a lot more on the line than you are if we agree on this."

The goblin snarled but remained quiet, properly chastised by his human counterpart. "This was not what the Director had in mind," he said eventually. "I will need to consult with him and the Board before I agree to these terms," he concluded as he hoped down from his tall chair and made for the door.

Harry nodded as he stood to see the goblin envoy out of the room. "Of course. I understand." He really did. What he was asking was something unprecedented in human-goblin relations. A Goblin Honour Squad was not one your run-of-the-mill militia units; it was consisted of the very best the Goblins had to offer and, more importantly, its members were all people who mattered in Goblin society. Anyone who'd ever occupied the post of Director or held a position on the Board had previously been part of an Honour Squad. Therefore, what he was asking for really were not crack troops—even if that was what they were.

What he was asking for were hostages.

Many would disapprove, of course, but Harry couldn't bring himself to care. Hostages assured him that the Goblins wouldn't stonewall a plan out of spite or nitpick where it wasn't necessary. It would assure

him of their loyalty to his cause, and if a bad reputation was the price, he was willing to shoulder it.

His eyes slowly went from the door to his desk as the thought deepened his commitment to his present course. There, hidden in plain sight, was a manuscript that his old war comrade, Albert Hughes, had forwarded him. According to the letter that had accompanied it, it was a treatise on strategy that he had compiled by drawing ideas from various sources. It had only taken Harry the first chapter to notice the difference between conventional treatises on warfare and Hughes'.

Where modern warfare advocated war based on the "rules of war" and the binding treaties on human rights and so forth, Hughes rejected all of that. In Harry's opinion, the man had either lost his sanity due to the war in Spain or he'd seen something truly mortifying, because Harry couldn't imagine what would have driven Hughes to write this…heresy who's premise was nicely summed up in the first chapter title.

Chaos Before Peace: The Dark Art of War.

Harry chuckled. At least Hughes had the excuse of having been affected by a year and a half of war.

For Harry, who had been pulled away from the chaos, what was his excuse for becoming a heretic?

London, United Kingdom; June 21st, 2010 (D-Day +501)…

When Harry had summoned her to his hospital room weeks ago, she had never dreamed that his reason for doing so would be to finally grant her the trust she had sought from him for the past year.

Of course, she had been as ecstatic as anyone that he had survived the trials and tribulations he had gone through since his capture, and had warmly greeted him when she'd seen him for the first time since the attack. However, deep within her, Josefina knew that she had still resented him a little bit for not inviting her into his world as he obviously did to others.

That resentment was now long gone.

Using a small, unbelievably uncommon, ovular artefact that her saviour's uncle had sworn would allow her to witness hidden magical phenomena, she had taken to her task like fish to water. First, she had been told to seek out a particular man within the mage community, and that had been the hardest part for all of two days. Since then, she had managed to compile what she humbly thought was an accurate picture of the target's daily routines, and had taken to shadowing the person everywhere he went within the area she now knew as Diagon Alley.

It took her all of a day to understand the person's tastes, as he seemed to be as repetitive as a well-oiled clock. Once she had that information, she took her job to the next step and prettied herself up as best she could, while at the same time changing her appearance such that anyone whom she might have met during the fiasco in Spain wouldn't recognize her.

Harry had been particularly insistent that she had to pass as a mage, so she had taken care to research the fashion styles in use and consulted with Harry's uncle, who seemed knowledgeable enough about the topic to help her pass as a normal mage girl. Unfortunately, that only got her into the Alley without trouble—for her task to work, she would have to become more than just a normal girl. It helped that the tailors seemed indecently interested in helping her out in picking out clothes that would accentuate her looks.

Thus, by the time she had reached the fifth day of her task, she had been ready and had begun executing the plan. The first step had been to catch the target's attention, which she pulled off flawlessly when she "accidentally" bumped into him at the Herbology store and began apologizing profusely to him while at the same time babbling out Herbology facts as she "tried" to explain her "distraction."

It worked like a charm. The man had become immediately interested the moment she began rattling off the Herbology knowledge, and combined with her practised innocent look and her cute "shyness," he had become smitten, going so far as to wave off her apology and inviting her to have a drink.

She'd had to act out the shy girl routine, of course; stuttering in surprise, babbling in a low voice as she seemingly debated with herself whether or not to go for it, etc…In the end, however, she of course accepted the invitation and they went on their first date that

night. It was…nice, in a word. She felt nothing for the man, of course (hell, learning all those Herbology facts had been nothing but a chore to her), but he had been gentlemanly towards her and kind, which almost made her feel bad about what she was planning to do.

The next few days went similarly, except that on the second date, she initiated the second step of her task—seeing his workplace.

It had taken some convincing—hell, she'd had to use every ounce of her acting abilities to get him to believe her that the reason she couldn't use magic was because she was currently beset by some magical ailment—but he had eventually given in, no doubt wanting to show off to her.

It was her very first foray into the Ministry of Magic, and Josefina couldn't help but feel like she suddenly understood Harry's animosity towards it. Everything about the building; from the décor, to the people, to the very architecture itself, screamed self-importance. It was like the entire building was a monument to the magic user's ego.

Regardless of her distaste, however, she played the awed newcomer part perfectly as she was led into the Auror Office where he said he worked. She had, of course, deeply researched the Aurors via Harry and the books he'd ordered from the family collection, but nothing really prepared her for the…banality of the place.

It was a mistake, in retrospect, to expect that because people used magic, everything they had would be different—including their workplaces. The Auror Office was perhaps the standing example that this wasn't true at all. In fact, it was arranged almost identically to any modern police precinct. Tables tended to be put by twos so that partners could work in close proximity to each other, there were cubicles here and there, and the offices for the more senior Aurors (she guessed) were given separate rooms.

"This is it, where the magic happens, so to speak," her date told her with an affable grin. She personally wanted to groan at the horrible line but kept her composure and gave him a shy smile that he seemingly took as approval of his status. Men were like that—always proud to gloat about their awesome jobs to potential mates.

Of course, having lived in a warzone and actually lived among soldiers, Josefina wasn't as easily impressed. But, the character she was playing was.

"It's…very loud," she noted; and it was. There weren't phones around to make a dreadful noise, but instead each desk was rigged with what seemed to be a small device that emitted a shrill noise every once in a while.

"Those are our dark magic detector alarms," he told her as he noticed her gaze. "Lets us know whenever someone uses Dark Magic, though it's a lot less accurate on the where."

Josefina felt the hairs on her nape stand up as a chilling thought crossed her mind. "Does every Ministry have one?" she asked, doing a commendable job in keeping her fear out of her voice.

Her date shrugged. "I think so," he answered half-heartedly. "I mean, I know the Spanish do, which was why the fact that they missed Potter's presence in their country for over a year was kind of a scandal in here."

"Why didn't they find him?" she asked, truly curious.

"Apparently, some of the Muggle weaponry interferes with our signal—the big, fiery stuff," he explained. "At least, that's about as much as I can understand. The technicians are always babbling on with words no one but them really understand."

She giggled. "They are a bit incomprehensible, aren't they?"

He laughed—it was a nice sound to her ears. Again, she felt a little sorry for the man, especially since he'd done nothing but treat her right during the brief time they'd been together. Still, the mission came first. "Where do you work, specifically?" she asked curiously.

She watched him point to where a woman with…pink?...hair was sitting at a desk, glaring at a piece of what looked to be parchment. "See the odd duck trying to make her parchment burst into flames with her mind?" he asked humorously. "She's my partner…err…colleague partner, that is," he hastily added. "My desk is the one in front of hers."

She giggled again, actually amused by the way he'd scrambled to explain his relationship with the woman with pink hair. "She seems…eccentric," she said innocently.

He laughed again. "She is that," he agreed. "Tough superior to have, though," he noted. "Eh, that reminds me of the time I got reamed for apparently asking inappropriate questions to a woman we were investigating."

She didn't have to act to narrow her eyes suspiciously at him. That was all natural. "What did you say?" she asked slowly, a hint of fake jealousy in her tone.

He chuckled nervously as he scratched at his nape. "Well, like I said, we were investigating this woman for a…case," he said, suddenly being evasive about the details of said case. "And I asked her whether she'd had any contact with a man we were looking for after they'd graduated together from their school. She'd already told us they'd had a bad breakup, so Tonks—that's her over there—took exception to my…insensitive query."

Josefina nodded, soaking up the information and committing it to memory for her report later on. Even if she couldn't find a use for some of the information she relayed back, there was the odd chance that maybe Harry, or someone he knew, could.

"So she's your superior?" she asked.

He made a 'sort-of' gesture with his hand. "Not quite," he replied. "She's senior in our partnership, so I guess that's right, but technically, we all have only one superior, and that's the Head of the Auror Office," he explained, adding a sneer when he mentioned the title.

She immediately sprung on that, of course. "You sound like you don't like him," she noted innocently.

"He's a right bast—irritating man," he quickly amended himself as he realized he was talking to his girlfriend. "Arrogant like no one's business and undeservedly so. Do you know how he got to that position?" he asked her, and the tone of his voice told her he expected her not to know. "Turned in his own father, he did; good old Lucius Malfoy himself."

Now that was a name she was familiar with, both from her research and Sirius' explanation of the situation in the Magical world. "The Lucius Malfoy?" she asked bewilderedly. "And the Head is his son?"

He gave her a small, knowing smile. "Really throws you for a loop, doesn't it?" he asked rhetorically. "But it's the truth, Merlin help us all. One day, little Draco Malfoy just walks in with his stunned father levitated in front of him, declaring that he had personally sought to make him pay for his crimes."

"Isn't that a good thing?" she asked, actually somewhat curious as to why so much distrust was being heaped on the Head of the Auror Office if he'd actually done something good.

Her date scoffed derisively. "It would have been, had the wily old ferret had decided to stick around in jail for more than a week," he said. "That's how long he was in Azkaban: one week. On the eighth day, exactly, the guards report him missing, along with several other dangerous inmates."

"So you think he was planted there?" she asked.

"The man's old, but he's not incapable," her date assured her. "It doesn't stretch the imagination that he got his son to bring him in and use the opportunity to break out a few old friends of his."

"Wouldn't that put his son in danger of being prosecuted for aiding in a jail break?" she pressed.

"Nah, Draco got the best part of the deal," he told her. "In return for bringing in his father, Draco got promoted from being a regular Auror like me to Scrimgeour's right hand man. Then, when the elections happened last year, Scrimgeour got bumped to Minister, and guess who inherited his position as Head of the Auror Office?"

"Malfoy," she supplied unnecessarily, although it seemed to stroke her date's ego that his 'woman' was capable to keep up with the conversation.

"Exactly. Worst part is, Scrimgeour doesn't even like the guy," he noted as he continued to lead her around the office, taking great care not to get overheard. "His promotion, far as we can tell, was

mostly a political move on Scrimgeour's part. Worked too. The problem is, now we Aurors have to deal with him and he's been stonewalling any decisive action against the Death Eaters, allegedly because of logistical problems." He scoffed again to show what he thought of that.

"I heard Dumbledore supports his tenure," she slipped in right then, taking great care to check his facial tells regarding the information.

He didn't disappoint. She saw a flash of anger on his face at the name before it was ruthlessly suppressed and concealed behind a neutral expression. "Whom did you hear that from?" he asked evenly.

She shrugged. "A few friends from work like to gossip," she lied. "It came up randomly when we were discussing the Ministry's efforts in containing the Death Eaters and the whole silly situation with the Muggles."

Her date sneered at the information. "Wouldn't surprise me," he grumbled nastily. "The old man seems to believe everyone deserves a second chance…and a third, and fourth, and so forth," he muttered the last part angrily. "Never pays attention to those who've suffered, just those who 'strayed from the path,'" he ranted, making air quotes to show what he thought of the Headmaster of Hogwarts' rhetoric. "Pack of lies is what it is."

Josefina quietly listened to him let out his frustrations, always keeping one eye on the Head of the Auror Office's door. It wasn't until she saw a shadow move behind the opaque glass door that she made her move. Gasping theatrically at a low vocal volume, she made a show of seeing her watch and paling. "Oh bollocks, I'm late!" she fretted.

It served well enough to shock her date out of his rage-induced trance. "Late? Late to what?" he asked confusedly.

"I'm meeting an old friend for tea," she explained—though she omitted the part where the old friend was the notorious Sirius Black and that the reason they were meeting was for an update. She raised herself up by the tip of her feet and planted a kiss on the corner of his mouth. "I'm so sorry for leaving you like this!" she apologized hastily.

He smiled kindly down at her. "It's alright, I understand. I'll Floo you later?" he suggested.

She smiled back at him. "I'd like that," she replied before walking away and giving him a small wave of goodbye as she made her way towards the elevator. Of course, she also happened to take the scenic route to the elevator, having been given the perfect excuse to do so by a small congregation of Aurors blocking the more direct path to it. Said route brought her straight past the Head of the Auror Office's door, just as it opened.

Pretending not to notice, she walked right into the Head Auror himself, Draco Malfoy, as he exited his office. Keeping up with her act, she made as if her momentum had been too much for her and fell forward, getting instinctively caught by the blonde man.

"Oi, watch it!" she heard him snap at her irritably. Not the speech of a born and bred aristocrat, certainly, but there was no doubt in her mind that the sharp voice belonged to the Head Auror.

She quickly scampered back to her feet and gave him a slight bow of apology. "I'm so sorry!" she apologized profusely. "I didn't…I wasn't…"

Having gotten his first look at her, sans her face, Malfoy seemed to rather inflate. "Don't you know who I am, girl?" he sneered at her. "I'm the Head Auror here, and you're not one of my subordinates. Care to explain why you're here and why you dared to run into me?"

This time, she raised her head and cowered back, keeping up the image of an intimidated, powerless young woman. "I'm s-so sorry!" she apologized again. "I…I was visiting my b-boyfriend, sir…I-I was distracted!"

Apparently, Malfoy hadn't been expecting the person who'd bumped into him to turn out to be an attractive young woman. While she noticed his shoulders start to slump slightly at the mention of a boyfriend, they were quickly rising again in a show of determination as she heard steps coming closer from behind.

"What's going on here?" angrily demanded her boyfriend as he approached them. "What are you doing to my girlfriend, sir?"

She saw Malfoy's eyes narrow dangerously. "Watch your tone, Longbottom, if you care to keep your job for another day," he warned the intruder. "Your little airhead of a girlfriend managed to run into me, which begs the question: why is she here to begin with?"

Her boyfriend didn't back down from the challenge. "I wanted to show her what I did, so she'd know what she was getting into," he all but snarled at his superior. "And that's all the explanation you're going to get from me!" he said with finality, gripping Josefina's arm and pulling her towards him. "Let's go, Lizzie," he told her, calling her by her fake identity.

She nodded submissively towards him and quietly got behind him, though she allowed her eyes to linger suggestively towards Malfoy, who didn't miss it for one second.

"You will respect me, Longbottom," Malfoy called out to him. "I am your superior, and thus I will have your obedience!"

Josefina wanted to jump in joy as her boyfriend stopped and turned to face the Head Auror, just as Malfoy returned her glances with a suggestive leer. She could feel the jealousy start to bubble within Neville, and it all worked perfectly within the grander plan.

"I don't answer to one of Dumbledore's dogs," Neville snarled, causing many an Auror to gasp in shock at the significant accusation. While the Ministry and Dumbledore weren't coming to blows just yet, it had been made illegal to report to anyone outside the Ministry hierarchy unless given written permission by the Minister's Office. It was a well known fact that the Minister never gave permission for anyone to report to Hogwarts and anyone involved with the school.

Josefina watched, with inner delight, as Malfoy reddened in either guilty embarrassment or insulted fury. "How dare you!" he cried out. "I'll have your badge for this, Longbottom!"

Neville gave him the two-fingered salute. "Not if I get yours first, Malfoy!" he snapped back. "Reporting to the old man is a prison-worthy offence, and I'll make sure the Minister hears all about it!"

"You have no proof!"

Josefina smiled. That was true, but it didn't matter. Heck, the rumour that Dumbledore was supporting Draco Malfoy's tenure was in itself a fantasy made up by Harry. Neither he, nor Sirius had any idea if that was true, but who cared? With the political ambience currently permeating the Ministry's relations with Hogwarts, neither side would believe the other's claims. Dumbledore could deny being involved with Draco Malfoy until the cows came home and the Minister wouldn't trust his word. The Minister, for his part, could claim any sort of proof—real or not—and Dumbledore's faction would cry foul all year long.

Of course, there was an easy way to clear the mix-up: get Draco Malfoy to testify under Veritaserum regarding his allegiances, which was why there was a contingency plan ready to deal with that problem. That wasn't part of her job, however, so she dutifully kept her sights on her own mission—to sow discord before the Ministry and Dumbledore could mend fences under the banner of a united front regarding the "Muggle Crisis," as they called it.

Josefina observed the growing row between the two men and smiled internally, while keeping a frightened expression and uncertain body language externally.

So far, so good.

Bulford Camp, United Kingdom, June 23rd, 2010 (D-Day +503)…

"Isn't this a little…ancient?" asked Sirius as he accompanied his 'nephew' on his inspection rounds around the camp.

Harry smiled as unified grunts perforated the still air of the Salisbury Plains. To his left, even as he walked past them, were hundreds of people wielding blunted staffs as they performed repetitive movements.

"It is, from a certain point of view," Harry allowed as he nodded, pleased, towards one of the instructors, who returned the favour with a grateful salute.

"They're wielding wooden staffs, Harry," Sirius pointed out, glad that no one else was around, allowing him to drop the false identities they kept up still. "How on earth is that not ancient?"

"Because you're assuming the point of this training is to teach them to use a staff as a weapon," Harry explained.

"Isn't it?"

Harry shook his head. "Of course not. In an age of firearms and cannons, what possible good would a staff do in a fire fight?" he asked amusedly. "The point of this exercise, Sirius, is to teach them something they've rarely had to use during their lives: discipline."

"I rather think using magic requires a fair deal of discipline," Sirius replied a little indignantly.

"Self-discipline, yes," Harry conceded. "But military? It's one thing to be able to channel energies through your body, Sirius, and it's quite another to be able to move in perfect concert with five hundred other people."

"How is that a necessary skill for Military Mages?" Sirius asked, curious. "You set the bar, Harry, and you were pretty independent on the field."

"If that's what you believe, you're dead wrong," Harry sounded amused. "A Military Mage must be capable of working with units as though it were their own limb. Alone, what am I? A destroyer, sure, but I am only one man. In an assault, I am essentially useless by myself unless the point is to demolish an entire area. In a defence, all the enemy has to do is kill me and the magic's over."

Sirius crossed his arms pensively. "I see your point."

"Mages are raised to be independent," Harry continued. "That's the way the Ministry educates them. How many collaborative works of magic have you ever heard of, Sirius?" he asked. "How many spells required more than one person to achieve? When Aurors hunt down criminals, how many times have you seen the takedown team number more than two, barring Dark Lords? The answer is always quite low."

"So you want them to be able to work well with others," Sirius summed up.

Harry gave a 'sort-of' gesture. "To a certain point," he allowed. "Independence on the field is a commendable thing to have, so I don't want them to completely forget that. What I want them to do is recognize that they are now part of a larger unit and thus they must think of the grander scheme whenever they make decisions."

"Why not put them through normal military drills, then?" proposed Sirius. "I'm sure there are a few trainers out there who would love to get their hands on mages for physical training."

Harry laughed. "Quite so, but that's exactly why I don't hand them over to someone else or put them through what normal soldiers go through," he motioned towards one of the mages training—a slightly overweight older man. "See that man? How could I ask him to go from doing little exercise to doing strenuous exercise from one day to the next? His body wouldn't be able to handle it. This method ensures that they are slowly eased into regular physical conditioning."

Sirius shrugged. "You know best, I'm sure," he conceded evenly.

Harry smiled slightly at the comment. "What about your side of the plan, Sirius?" he asked, nodding in satisfaction at another good display of unit discipline and receiving another thankful salute. "How are our…bedbugs doing?"

Sirius frowned. "From what I've been sent, it looks like we're doing a lot of damage to Muggle-Mage relations," he told his godson. "The Balkans in particular seem to be heating up quite a bit, and don't even get me started on the situation in Africa."

Harry noted that Sirius' voice trailed off at the end of his report and quickly made the logical connections to understand why. "You feel uneasy about this newest ploy of mine," he observed idly.

Sirius didn't even sound surprised that his godson had hit his fears right on the nail. "The point of our enterprise is to reveal magic to the world and force both sides to coexist," he pointed out. "So why are we using our people to fan hatred between both sides?"

Harry finally stopped his walking and turned to face the cadre of mages training on the open field, ostensibly inspecting them in their training. "Sirius, how powerful would you say our military is right now?" he asked out of the blue.

Sirius blinked and thought about the question for a moment before giving a tentative answer. "Accounting for missile armaments, the Royal Navy, Air Force, and Army…I'd put us at about first place on the continent, especially what with having five hundred thousand combat veterans still on the field in Spain," he guessed. "Why?"

"Who would have the second most powerful military, then?" Harry continued, ignoring Sirius' question.

"The French," Sirius replied without thinking.

"Third?"

"Germany," Sirius supplied again, quickly getting vexed from the impromptu game of trivia that Harry had unleashed on him. "What's your point, Harry?"

Harry brought up a fist and uncurled his index finger, his expression pensive. "If we calculate the likely result of a war with France, we could theoretically assume a victory over our opponent, but not without significant cost to our manpower and arsenal," he theorized out loud before uncurling another finger. "Second calculation: after said hypothetical war with France, a threatened Germany would undoubtedly seek to curb our rising power by opposing us, undoubtedly seeking to rectify the balance of power by enlisting the help of Austria and Italy. Such a war, combining the military resources of one rising superpower and two medium-class states against a single military superpower, would not be insurmountable, but would come at a catastrophic cost to our resources."

"But that would eliminate both of the major threats in Europe," Sirius reminded him. "Who else would sanely oppose us after such wins?"

Harry smiled secretively, as though he knew something Sirius didn't. "Very well, then; we come to the third calculation," he humoured his godfather. "France and Germany, along with its allies, stand defeated, at significant cost to our military resources. Poland and most of Eastern Europe stand defenceless before the might of our

nation," he laid out calmly. "Two choices stand before them: submit, or fight."

"Obviously, we could threaten them into submission," Sirius supplied as though it were common sense.

"Could we?" retorted Harry calmly. He uncurled a third finger. "Domination of Eastern, Central, and Western Europe would make us the indisputable masters of the continent, and allowing us free reign over such an expansive population would mean the inevitable rise of a massive military force, backed by a solid and fully integrated economy," he rationalized. "So, third calculation: who would gain the most by aiding Eastern Europe to stand against us?"

"Russia, of course."

Harry smiled as he glanced to the side, catching sight of an approaching white-haired man. "Ah, speaking of bedbugs, here comes one of our best."

Sirius looked the same way Harry was and also recognized the approaching figure, though it startled him somewhat to find out this particular man was in his godson's employ—not just because of who he was, but also due to his rather…eccentric reputation.

"Report, Master Lovegood," Harry ordered with a knowing smile, his hand outstretched invitingly.

Xenophilius Lovegood, the infamous editor of the Quibbler, grinned right back, shrugging off the knapsack he'd been carrying over his rather garish, neon-yellow robes. "The Russian Ministry of Magic has officially been put under investigation by the Kremlin," he said as he approached. "The Russian President seems to be under the impression that the Ministry has perhaps been…tampering with his advisors. Unfortunately, the media caught wind of this, so the economy's taking another tumble. A clean job, overall."

Harry nodded, pleased with the report. "Well done, Master Lovegood," he praised the older man.

Sirius, for his part, was completely astounded to see the easy interaction between his godson and quite possibly the British Magical society's equivalent to a town fool. When had the two

started working together? For that matter, when had they even met? But, more importantly…

"Russia?" he asked, surprised. "Why on earth do we need to meddle with Russia? Their economic situation isn't exactly conducive to supporting a major military campaign against us!"

Harry chuckled in amusement at his godfather's protests. "Sirius, if we fought every major power in Western and Central Europe, our military forces would be catastrophically diminished by the time we came to the steps of Warsaw. At that point, Russia would only need to ally with the Eastern European nations and use their considerable manpower to crush whatever's left of our forces. The war would then serve as their method to fix their economic woes."

"More importantly," Xenophilius added with a bright grin. "If every nation in Europe followed our example, we wouldn't just be fighting conventional forces, but Military Mages of their own as well."

Sirius actually took a step back as the full weight of that statement hit him. He'd never assumed that the other European nations would incorporate mages into their own military! In hindsight, that was an incredibly dumb assumption to make, as any rational government would quickly jump on the idea and thus increase their military power substantially at a relatively low cost.

"So in order to prevent the acquisition of Military Mages in other European militaries…" Harry continued, trailing off to see if Sirius could finally put the pieces together.

"…we incite the population of these countries against their mages," Sirius filled in, finally understanding. He slapped a hand to his forehead in astounded realization. "Harry…that's brilliant!"

Harry smiled privately as he continued to ostensibly observe the cadre training, his hands now clasped behind his back. "That's one aspect," he agreed. "But there's another face to this plan. Master Lovegood, if you please?"

Xenophilius nodded obediently. "Of course, sir," he turned to grab something from his knapsack and pulled out two bound scrolls that he tossed to Sirius. "Those contain names of mages wanting to immigrate to Britain," he explained. "The one with the blue seal

contains the names of those wanting to live under the jurisdiction of the Ministry, and the one with the red seal want to live under the Crown government."

Sirius' head snapped towards Harry. "I wasn't aware that we were still recruiting," he noted.

"Of course," Harry replied nonchalantly. "For our integrated society to come about, Sirius, we need numbers. The mages from the continent will provide those numbers."

"What about those wanting to live under the Ministry specifically?" Sirius asked, privately noting that said scroll weighed a lot more than its counterpart. "Aren't they just going to be trouble later on?"

Xenophilius chuckled while Harry gave a small smile. "Precisely the point," Harry replied simply.

"I don't follow," Sirius panned.

"The Ministry will rebel, sooner or later," Harry reminded his godfather. "If we invade Europe right now, we would keep having to deal with mage rebellions wherever a Ministry lies intact," he continued. "Thus, instead of dealing with them piece-meal, wouldn't it be better to just lump all our problems in one place?"

Sirius gaped at the absurdity of such a plan. "But the combined force of so many mages would be horrible to fight against!" he protested. "What should be a small insurrection would become a terrible civil war!"

Harry nodded. "Under normal circumstances? Yes," he agreed. "But we have our trump cards."

"Military Mages," Xenophilius supplied with a wide grin.

"Which number less than the combined might of all the world's mages!" Sirius shot back hotly at the eccentric man before returning his attention to Harry's back as his godson kept his watch on the cadre of practising Military Mages. "Harry, this is insane!"

Both men saw Harry's shoulders slump a little, though not in resignation apparently. "Sirius, if we have to fight every Ministry of

Magic in every country we face individually, then each skirmish would only serve to indirectly train the others in our tactics, thus making them harder opponents," he explained calmly, his jade green eyes still observing the practicing mages. "However, if we were to gather every potential mage enemy in one place, they would firstly have to deal with multiple language barriers; secondly, they would have to integrate their various command hierarchies and economic systems, which is extraordinarily difficult; thirdly, they would need more resources to feed their populace and maintain their lifestyles; and fourthly, they would have no forewarning as to how we fight magic users. Do you understand now?"

Xenophilius whistled appreciatively while Sirius gawked at his godson's cold rationale. On the surface, it sounded airtight, certainly, and Sirius had to admit that in military matters, he was no good. Politics, rabble-rousing, propaganda? Sure, no problem. Creating and masterminding a region-wide campaign for military domination? Not so much.

Knowing this, Sirius felt his spirits deflate a little as he conceded the argument to his godson. "You sound like you know what you're doing, Harry," he admitted as he glanced at his watch. "So I'll trust you on this plan as well. Unfortunately, however, must dash—got a meeting with one of our other agents in the Magical World."

"Good luck," Harry said by way of farewell, not even bothering to turn around to watch as his godfather Disapparated. However, once he heard the almost silent popping sound, he turned his head slightly to glance at Xenophilius, whose tall figure still towered over him. "What else?"

Xenophilius broke into a wide grin. It wasn't, however, a very nice one. "Chaos at the Ministry in London," he reported gleefully. "Turns out your little pet project managed to rattle a beehive in the Aurors' Office and it's got Scrimgeour on a witch hunt, figuratively speaking."

Harry allowed a smile. "Of course she did," he noted as though it were obvious. "I always pick the right person for the job."

"How did you know she would have this effect?" asked Xenophilius, genuinely curious.

"Right timing, right people, right place," Harry replied easily. "Longbottom, from what a…friend told me, was rather bashful during an interview when the subject of sex came up, telling me he was either inexperienced or extraordinarily shy. Seeing as he's an Auror, that disqualifies the latter option, leaving the first. Being unaccustomed to romantic relationships means he would probably latch on jealously to the first girl to show some attraction to him, making him susceptible to fits of jealous rage. In addition, he is known to hate the Head of the Auror Office, Draco Malfoy, which, summed up with the other qualities I've delineated, makes him the right person."

Xenophilius nodded pensively, scratching his greying goatee pensively. "What about right timing?"

"You've heard that the Ministry was debating the takeover of the Muggle government before the new King was enthroned, yes?"

"Of course," Xenophilius replied dismissively.

"Well it seems Dumbledore and Scrimgeour were at odds about how to proceed," Harry continued. "Dumbledore wanted the Ministry to simply adopt an isolationist attitude, while Scrimgeour wanted to take over our government as per the treaty. Suffice to say, their relations were at their worst point in years, thereby making it easy for us to fuel the flames of distrust with half-baked rumours, thus the right timing."

"And the Auror Office was the right place, wasn't it?" Xenophilius asked for confirmation. "Draco Malfoy, practically the poster boy for second chances but highly unpopular, versus Neville Longbottom, scion of the respected Longbottoms and loyal Ministry Auror, all in one place."

Harry shot Xenophilius a smile from over his shoulder. "Correct. You're getting better at this, Master Lovegood," he praised the older man.

The older man laughed, making one of the trainees on the grounds lose his focus and accidentally trip. One of the trainers immediately rushed over and berated him as the two men watched on. "It's hard not to improve when one is in the presence of a master," he noted

with a sly grin. "Makes me wonder whether I really deserve that fancy title you keep giving me."

It was Harry's turn to chuckle, though he kept it silenced by muffling himself with his fist. "I am no master, Master Lovegood," he said humbly. "I have some talent in planning and strategy, but I'm not quite at that level," he said before then adding with a feral smile, "Yet."

Xenophilius laughed.

Bulford Camp, United Kingdom, June 25th, 2010 (D-Day +505)…

"Well?"

Harry waited patiently for an answer as he stood gazing at the Salisbury plains beyond the perimeter fence, hands clasped behind his back. Today he was receiving at last an answer from the goblin leadership, as well as possibly finally receiving orders from the authorities in London, a full month after the attack.

Behind him, looking over an official communiqué from London, were Sirius and Xenophilius, on whom Harry had come to depend as his liaison to the Magical World.

"It's as you thought," Xenophilius summed up as he held up the official document and tapped it lightly. "The order's come straight from the King."

"I'd heard about something like this, but I didn't think they were quite serious," Sirius admitted. "Isn't it a bit precipitous to have you do this already?"

Harry sighed, a melancholic smile on his face. "An order to begin deployment of the Military Mages in Spain for a quick end to the conflict," Harry spoke without even having looked at the document. "It was inevitable, really."

"It's a bad idea," Sirius opined. "The French are already nearly on the warpath because of the big reveal, and the idea of British militarized mages will surely tip them over the edge. The Foreign Office is barely managing to keep things from escalating, but it won't

last. Warwick's been having a terrible time keeping up the government's good appearances."

"Their Ministry's certainly had a nightmarish time," Xenophilius added in. "Word has it that the French government's been demanding that the mages register themselves with the 'proper' authorities, which the Ministry's been trying to rebuff in a diplomatic manner," he relayed before shrugging and shaking his head. "Suffice to say, it's not working."

"Plus, we've been getting reports of unrest all across Britain," Sirius continued. "Anti-mage rallies, tolerance counter-protests…we're losing control, Harry."

"And the Ministry's bound to reap a great reward for it," Harry concluded, still facing the vast plains before him.

Sirius nodded with a grimace. "There'd be no stopping them if they tried to take over in a month or two," he estimated. "Our constables are either being overworked trying to keep the protests from getting out of hand or are part of the protests, so our security's gone down the sink."

"Death Eater rumblings have been getting worse lately as well," Xenophilius informed Harry. "They're not blind to the decaying situation—they're likely to take advantage of it to wipe out the rest of the Muggle government."

"Then all they have to do is wait for the Ministry to take over, then they take over the Ministry," Harry filled in, a melancholic smile on his face. "Build up a power to then seize the throne…without using their forces, they weaken us and reap the rewards. Truly ingenious."

Sirius' expression turned sombre, even perhaps a little afraid. "Harry, there's very few people who possess that sort of strategic thinking within the Magical World…" he began.

"Two years ago," Harry interrupted him suddenly. "Mum informed me of a particular theory she'd been working on since that day in October, 1981…" he informed Sirius and Xenophilius. "She recalled, and dad confirmed it, that Voldemort's body was disintegrated into dust, and yet a wraith-like creature had escaped from the remains and fled our home." He took a deep breath. "But what could such a

being be? More importantly, the spell they had used to bring the Dark Lord down hadn't been that powerful—not enough to turn his body into ash, anyway, no matter how much we've played it up since," he related. "So mum came up with a rather simple, but horrifying conclusion…"

"You're not serious…" Xenophilius breathed, becoming significantly paler as he caught on.

Harry nodded, looking up towards the blue sky. "Voldemort did not die that night," he confirmed. "And, if mum is correct, then the leader of the Death Eaters has been, for the past year or so, Voldemort himself."

Silence descended upon the trio as two of them gaped at the third.

"P-Preposterous!" Xenophilius protested. "If he was back, why wouldn't he show himself for a full year?"

"To make the Death Eaters seem less of a threat than they would appear to be if he were out in the open," Harry replied simply. "If the Death Eaters had been publicly revealed to be led by the Dark Lord, there would be such widespread panic that the Ministry would be paralyzed, which doesn't serve him well this time around," Harry analyzed. "He wants the Ministry to be stable, because he wants the Ministry to take over the Crown government. Then, when the mages are in power, he can swoop in and install himself as the ruler of both worlds, so to speak."

Sirius nodded, still quite pale from the revelation, but also cupping his chin pensively. "Ingenious," he muttered. "And we can't reveal this to the mage general public, because we have no proof."

Xenophilius nodded along, also agreeing with his colleagues. "It'd be hearsay, nothing more, and Scrimgeour isn't about to believe that a man who's been gone for the past twenty nine years is suddenly back and manipulating events behind the scenes!"

"So, how do we deal with an empowered Ministry and a decaying situation?" asked Harry rhetorically, although neither men caught onto it.

"We should distract them with bigger bait," Sirius suggested. "Say, the spy situation within their own ranks."

"Or we could incite a few Dark Creature tribes to cause some havoc," suggested Xenophilius.

Harry smiled at both suggestions, but shook his head nonetheless. "Good ideas, but neither will retain their attention for that long," he told them. "The spy situation is something they have suspected for some time, so it'll just be a matter of time before they catch our first-layer moles. When they do, they will then strike at us, hoping to take us over before we can react."

"The second idea has some merit, but would take too long in setting up," he added then. "If a mass of Dark Creatures suddenly sprung up all around Ministry territory without sufficient build-up, then even the most novice of Aurors would see that the situation was orchestrated. Seeing as how the Death Eaters have been rather focused on empowering the Ministry rather than sowing chaos, it wouldn't take long for at least Dumbledore to realize that we are behind it, thus giving them a reason to strike first," he analyzed. "We don't have the time for establishing this gradual build-up, so we cannot risk getting exposed and struck at this soon."

"Then what's the plan, Harry?" asked Sirius, frustrated with his godson's mind games. Honestly, was it that hard to just tell them the facts without beating around the bush?

"The plan," he began, before looking over his shoulder at his colleagues and smiling at them knowingly. "Has been in action for the past month."

Such a pronouncement shocked Sirius and Xenophilius, both of whom had only heard of the current crisis now and had thus only just starting planning contingencies. To hear that Harry, a young man at least twenty years younger than they, had already planned and carried out a strategy well before any of this information had come to light was…stunning, to say the least.

Harry turned around slowly, his right hand coming up in a receiving gesture towards someone behind Sirius and Xenophilius. Both men turned slightly to see the small figure of Josefina, her obsidian black

long hair swaying behind her in the soft breeze, coming towards them. Behind her, surprising both men, was a small group of Goblins.

"The Goblin Nation has answered," Harry said with a triumphant smile. "And my finest bedbug has come home."

Silently, one of the Goblins behind Josefina marched up to Harry and there, right in front of him, kneeled, a cloth-wrapped package raised above his head. Harry's smile widened into a grin as he pointed towards it with his open hand.

Silently, the knot unfurled itself, and Harry spoke once more. "The Ministry has their eyes on us because we are the biggest threat," he repeated. "The Death Eaters empower the Ministry, so they have toned down their attacks. Dumbledore sits on the periphery of this conflict, because none of his assets are any longer under attack," he then smirked knowingly as he gazed down on the package as it unravelled itself. "But now…"

He did not turn away as the package's contents were revealed. Instead, his expression became triumphantly vicious as he witnessed the fruit of his meticulous planning. Before him, he could hear the shocked gasps of Sirius and Xenophilius as the package's contents were revealed.

The bloodied head of Draco Malfoy, his expression frozen forever in shock.

"…Longbottom's antipathy for Draco Malfoy is well known," he continued, the triumphant tone returning to his voice. "Furthermore, there were witnesses to an altercation between the two over Josefina. Coupled with accusations of being a spy for Dumbledore and his status as the son of a Death Eater, the Ministry will defend Longbottom while vilifying Malfoy; Dumbledore will accuse Death Eaters of assassinating an alleged spy to deflect attention; and the Death Eaters will attack the Ministry, bound to avenge one of their own's loss, or otherwise risk dissent from Malfoy senior."

He heard someone—probably Xenophilius—gag at the sight of the bloodied head. He didn't blame the man—after all, when had Xenophilius ever been in combat? His job was to control the flow of information, not fight on the front lines.

"Decapitation isn't usual amongst mage murders, Harry," Sirius pointed out, pale but otherwise fine. "Someone will suspect."

Harry didn't even bother to turn around to face Sirius. "Josefina?" he simply prompted.

Said young woman nodded and clasped her hands in front of her in salute. "Our Goblin colleagues here managed to replicate the signature from Neville's wand and deliberately used magic to commit the crime," she reported. "The missing head will be explained by the magical signature of an exploding curse."

"And Neville?" challenged Sirius. "He can still testify under Veritaserum."

Josefina gave Sirius a 'who do you take me for' look. "Neville can't remember what he did last night," she informed the uninformed amongst them. "I slipped him some roofies during our date."

"Taking out the Malfoy child was disgustingly simple," one of the Goblins—not the one carrying the head—snarled. "All he needed to see was our female comrade in revealing clothing and that was the end of him."

"We've even managed to round up a few auditory witnesses who will swear they heard two male voices shouting loudly and a female voice sobbing," Josefina added. "The story is that Malfoy threatened my persona with sacking Neville for insubordination unless I could 'convince' him otherwise, and that Neville found out and killed him and I in a crime of passion, with my own death being accidental."

"You see?" Harry then said, addressing Sirius and Xenophilius as he walked past them, hands still clasped behind his back. "Thus incited, the Ministry, Death Eaters, and Dumbledore will swallow each other up while we clean up the mess in Spain," he summarized. "With this, my arrangements are complete without the use of our military forces. We are now free to subjugate Spain, and begin our walk down the bloody road to conquest."

Coast of Scotland, United Kingdom, June 30th, 2010…

Neville could scarcely believe how messed up his life had gotten in such a short amount of time.

A month ago, he had been a respected Auror and trusted man of the government. He had been on the forefront of numerous operations to take down high-profile Death Eaters and had received honours for his dedicated work in making society safe. He had been partnered with Nymphadora Tonks, also a respected Auror, and the two had made an amazing duo, with Tonks bringing a great deal more empathy to the team while Neville took care of providing the brawn.

And now, a month later, he was a criminal being escorted to Azkaban on two counts of murder.

There had been no way around it. The evidence at Malfoy's house had been damning. They had his wand signature—odd, considering he couldn't remember using it that night—and apparently had witnesses ready to testify that they heard him shouting at Malfoy that very night. The fact that Malfoy had been decapitated, with no head around, implied he had probably used a very dark blasting curse, which by itself was a one-way ticket to Azkaban.

So now they were carrying him off to that horrid, foul stain on the earth.

The worst part, Neville reflected, had been his trial—if one could call it that. Being a loyal subordinate of Scrimgeour's, the Minister had been "requested" to sequester himself from the proceedings due to bias by those everyone and their dog knew to be sympathetic to the Death Eaters. Dumbledore, for his, part, had remained silent, either knowing that arguing would do him no good, or that Neville being out of the way could be a good thing for his own agenda. How, Neville didn't know, but then…Neville wasn't Albus Dumbledore.

Thus left without support from two of the most important members of the Wizengamot, it hadn't been hard for the rest to find him guilty of not just one, but two counts of murder. That's right; they had accused Neville of killing his precious Elizabeth as well, ostensibly in a fit of jealous rage when she had, according to those vile prosecutors, chosen Malfoy over him. With no one capable of testifying for him, Neville knew then and there that he would get convicted. How could they not? He had sat in enough trials to know how this one would end up, and not even the character testimony of Tonks or any other sympathetic Auror had managed to move the judges.

So now, here he was: on his way to Azkaban, his sentence being imprisonment for life.

It was hard for him not to rage at the injustice he was suffering. How many years had he given to Magical Society for it to so easily write him off as a murderer? Where was due process? Where had the famous Hermione Granger, supposedly the champion of the oppressed and unjustly persecuted, been when he had needed a defence attorney?

He had been betrayed—that was his sincerest belief. Someone had set him up and the rest had left him out to dry.

Even the pitying glances from his escort didn't diminish the sense of betrayal he was feeling. If they sympathized with him so much, why hadn't they spoken up at his trial? Why had only his partner of five years spoken for him? Where had all the people who had praised him only months prior been? Had their silence been bought? Was their honour truly so cheap to them?

A wave of disgust hit him as the thought festered in his mind. He just couldn't bring himself to understand how the loyalty he'd shown—even after his parents had been killed by Auror inefficiency—had been so cheaply repaid. In his mind, there was no justification for betraying one's loyal subordinates. Even sequestered from the trial, Scrimgeour could have marshalled his supporters to help him, but he hadn't. Dumbledore had likely prevented Granger from defending him, and it was damned clear that the Death Eaters had done everything in their power just to make life miserable for him, now that he stood accused of murdering the son of one of their highest-ranked.

Neville glared at the small boat tied to the rickety pier that would inevitably bring him to Azkaban. This was a disgrace; an unfitting end for him!

"Come along, then, Longbottom," one of the guards waiting at the pier spoke up then. "Haven't got all bloody day."

"Easy there, John, he's one of us, remember?" one of his escort warned the man. Neville felt like scoffing in disbelief, but chose to stay silent, his glare still fixed on the vehicle of his doom.

"If he was, he wouldn't be here like every other prisoner who'd been put behind bars, now would he?" snarked John the Guard. "Anyway, time's a'running, so get a move on, will ya?"

Grudgingly it seemed, Neville's escort began to move him forward, their wands trained on him—as their training dictated—in case he tried anything. Damned unlikely, considering they had taken his wand, snapped it in half, and then slammed on the new anti-magic cuffs that they'd first pioneered to restrain the infamous Harry Potter with. If anything, he'd be lucky to get even the simplest spell working.

So not only was he being framed, but he was also robbed of his birthright and humiliated before his peers. What a fantastic world he had worked for all his adult life. Why didn't he just become a Herbology professor, like he'd first intended?

Well, that one was simple enough to answer, Neville supposed. His parents had died, in his final year at Hogwarts, during a botched Auror raid where the expected reinforcements had arrived roughly an hour late due to mismanagement. Incensed, he had dropped his dream of teaching and opted for joining the Auror Corps in the hopes of preventing any such tragedy from reoccurring again. It also helped that three months after he'd joined, he was able to cut down the Death Eaters who'd killed his parents.

His way to the boat was silent, as he refused to give any of the men present the satisfaction of hearing him whimper, or plead, or even defy them. They could take damn near everything he had in this life, but the one thing they wouldn't ever get was his pride. He knew he was innocent, and he knew he was a damn fine Auror; perhaps not on the calibre of Ginny Weasley, or even the famous Kingsley Shacklebolt, but he was no slouch, and he had only been improving since the start of his career.

He had just placed his first steps onto the pier, however, when his thoughts were disturbed by the sound of a body crumpling, causing him to jerk his head sideways to glance behind him. Arguably more shocked than he should be, given his current predicament, he gazed at the robed figures of Death Eaters swooping down on his escort, taking each down with expert spell fire and quickly eliminating any opposition.

Something in Neville's mind clicked at that point. Since when were Death Eaters so surgically precise? Usually, they were all about the wild spell fire and random hits. Organization and indeed combat expertise of this calibre was not something he was used to seeing in Death Eaters. It was almost like…someone was trying to frame them.

Neville started to turn around when he suddenly felt two hands on his shoulders and a large force bear down on him, causing him to fall to his knees mid-turn. His head bowed, he looked up through his bangs at his captors and noticed that besides the two he could glance holding him down, there were six more taking stock of the damage they had caused and another just sitting there on a rock not five feet from him.

"I apologize for the rough treatment, Mister Longbottom, but you know how this is," the masked figure said, his voice barely muffled by the mask. "Appearances and all that."

The figure paused then as he looked to Neville's side, where one of the robed Death Eaters had nodded to him. "All clear, sir," said the man.

The masked man on the rock nodded. "Good," he said simply before turning to Neville. "Now then, with no one to interrupt us…" he raised his hand to his own mask and, with a wave, the white garment suddenly vanished into thin air, revealing a face Neville had long ago burned into his memory.

Sirius Black. Godfather of Harry Potter, the most despised man in all of the Magical World.

"Why don't you and I have an honest conversation?" Sirius suggested with an enigmatic smile. Neville didn't even have a chance to respond, as Sirius then turned his attention to the men holding him down. "Bring him to the safehouse," he ordered before glancing at two more of his subordinates and pointing at them with two fingers. "Jenson, Maguire, make sure to leave the crime scene believable. We need the Ministry to buy into an execution theory."

"Yes, sir," came the swift replies.

Sirius smiled at Neville then. "One more detail before we go," he said idly as he pointed up his wand. "Morsmorde!"

In the sickly green glow of the Death Eaters' signature spell, Neville felt his world tug out of existence as he disappeared from the area with the familiar "Pop!" of Apparation, heading to a destination unknown to him.

Hogwarts Castle, Scotland, United Kingdom, July 1st, 2010 (D-Day +511)…

To say that the last month or so had been bad was like saying Grindelwald had been a little bad, or that Voldemort was maybe a tad violent. In short, it was an understatement and stupid, in Dumbledore's opinion. Nearly everything that could've gone wrong in the past month had, and he was no closer to solving the insane amount of problems that kept popping up every day.

Not to mention, he now had another problem to deal with. Neville Longbottom's apparent assassination at the hands of Death Eaters.

"Still no change?" he asked wearily to the man standing before his desk.

The elderly gentleman, for his part, shook his head slowly. "Augusta is terribly distraught about her only grandson's murder, estranged or not," he informed Dumbledore. "She demands action be taken against the Death Eaters for this, or else my dear sister has promised to cut off her share of the funding."

"Algie, surely she wouldn't undermine the cause just on this," Dumbledore noted skeptically. After all, her support for Dumbledore, and Neville's support for the Ministry had driven quite the wedge between the two relatives. So much so that, in the last few months, they had stopped talking to each other entirely.

"You misjudge the severity of the situation, Albus," Algie Longbottom sniffed. "Augusta may have had words with young Neville, as did many of us, but he was still her only grandson, and only surviving link to her son."

"And yet she did not speak up at his trial," Dumbledore observed shrewdly. "Or even mobilize her considerable influence."

Algie seemed to ignore the pointed remark, instead lifting his hand to inspect his fingernails. "Augusta probably believed you would try to use the situation to win over Neville," the man observed dully. "She was quite miffed when you did nothing there as well."

"Young Neville was a lost cause," Dumbledore insisted. "Before he went over to Scrimgeour, he took enough information to get ten of our contacts in the Ministry arrested!"

"And yet Draco Malfoy wasn't worthy of such reprimand, I noticed," Algie countered, again, quite bored with the proceedings. Almost as though he knew how this would end. "Those rumours of your support for his position were false, of course?"

"Absolutely," Dumbledore confirmed, though he privately reasoned that eventually, he might have done such a move to try and weasel Malfoy, and thus the Auror Office, entirely into his camp. "We still haven't got a clue how they spread."

"Miss Weasley seems to disagree," Algie noted, his inspection of his fingernails suddenly screeching to a halt as his sharp eyes glanced up to pierce Dumbledore's stare. "She has quite the theory, in fact. Her brother Bill seems to concur."

"Miss Weasley's perceptions are currently considered to be…questionable," Dumbledore replied almost impatiently. "Her interactions with the object of her apparent obsession throws her judgment into doubt."

Algie Longbottom stared at Dumbledore for a while, his usually blank-looking eyes sharp and narrowed at him, as though he were trying to discern whether or not Dumbledore was lying. After a while, he decided the older man wasn't lying, and nodded. "Very well. I shall say no more on this, then," he concluded before grabbing his fedora from the edge of one of the high-backed chairs and setting it onto his bald head. "I leave you instead with this reminder: the Longbottoms will have nothing to do with you if you do not seek to redress this most vile attack on our already diminished numbers against the Death Eaters. Good day, Dumbledore."

With that, the elderly gentleman gave a tip of his hat, turned around, and walked straight into the fireplace, a casual toss from his left hand unleashing the Floo powder necessary to get him home.

Left alone, Dumbledore steepled his hands and closed his eyes as he descended into frustrated thought. This was an economic blow he couldn't afford to suffer. The Longbottoms' numbers, as Algie had

said, were indeed diminished, but their wealth, perhaps as a consequence, had greatly increased with the years.

Years that, unfortunately, had diminished Dumbledore's own physical abilities. At 129, he was well aware that his physical stamina had decreased to the point where stretched out duels were quickly becoming an impossibility. Twenty years ago? Fifteen? Certainly. But now?

His eyes drifted to his arms, partially revealed from their hiding place in his sleeves by the raised position he had his hands. Barely more than skin and bones at this point. Even for a mage, he was quickly reaching the outer limits of longevity, and he knew it poignantly.

Perhaps magic loved contradictions, then, because his magical power hadn't even decreased a drop in all these years, instead strengthening itself and refining itself such that he could do the most amazing work he'd ever done with half of the power it would have taken him years ago. Wandless magic was still tricky for him, but he chalked that up on lack of training during his upbringing, as the Potter boy had shown that large feats of magic were indeed possible without a wand.

Potter. Harry Potter. Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. This was one of the current banes of his existence. Ironic, then, that he was also the Chosen saviour that he'd been searching for all these years. From the moment he'd known Voldemort had been vanquished in 1981, he had been looking for this young boy and his parents, only to finally find him at the very moment that the Ministry and, in fact, the entire world's eyes were on him. Even worse, the boy had grown into a stubborn, embittered man (in his opinion), and had singlehandedly lifted the veil of secrecy that had for so long kept the Magical World out of sight. No amount of magic could possibly work now to erase that fact.

"You seem lost in thought, Albus," noted a wizened, old voice from the door.

Startled at the fact that he'd missed someone else's presence outside his door—as he had charms set up to warn him of any presence outside his office—he nonetheless calmed down relatively quickly when he saw it was his old research partner, Nicholas Flamel.

"I am concerned, Nicholas, for our future," Albus replied simply as he rested his weary head onto the palm of his right hand. "Everything that could have gone wrong, has," he pointed out.

The much, much older wizard nodded sagely, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "And the beneficiary in this is blindingly apparent," Flamel added to his friend's musings.

Dumbledore nodded. "Harry Potter."

Flamel nodded. "And yet you persist in dismissing this fact before our allies, Albus. Why?" he asked, no aggression, no demand in his voice. A simple request between friends.

"You know why," Dumbledore replied simply, causing Flamel to sigh.

"Albus, the prophecy merely stated that someone who could take down the Dark Lord would arise, not that he'd be a paragon of virtue and a staunch defender of magical isolationism," Flamel pointed out.

"The people will not accept him as their saviour if he does not fulfill those requirements, Nicholas," Dumbledore countered. "In fact, it is doubtful they would support him now, after all he's done, even if he changed his ways."

"Then let him go, Albus," Flamel argued. "Whitewashing the truth is going to hurt us in the long run. If our allies think he's still worthy of your brand of redemption, they'll handicap themselves in a fight against him to bring him in. That'll get people killed."

Dumbledore sighed in frustration as he rubbed his temples in a vain attempt at massaging away his current headache. "What do you suggest I do, then, Nicholas? Let him roam free, accumulating massive influence?" he asked dejectedly. "We both know the world he'll create with his monstrous army is not the one we want."

"Then make your own force," Flamel suggested simply.

"I beg your pardon?"

The several times centenarian walked over to Dumbledore's desk and leaned forward on it, making sure Dumbledore had a clear line

of sight with his eyes. "Make. Your. Own. Force," he repeated slowly. "If neither Scrimgeour, nor Potter, can deliver on the world you want, then you must fight for it yourself, with your own resources."

"We would be betraying the Ministry," Dumbledore protested. "Our allies wouldn't hear of it."

"They would, if you explained to them that the Ministry is currently a nest of Death Eater puppets," Flamel pointed out. "Albus, the path you wanted to take has long since been taken away from you. It's time to let go and think outside the box, as the Muggles might say."

Dumbledore didn't answer right away. Instead, he leaned into his hand and rubbed his beard pensively as he reflected on his current situation. Raising Harry Potter to hero status amongst mages was, at the moment, an impossible task—and probably would remain so in the future. He had spat on too many traditions, stepped on too many toes to make it all go away. Still, it was weird to hear his old friend, typically in favor of equal tolerance all around, to support fighting the unionist Harry Potter. Thus far, he had only humoured his friend's suggestion as a theoretical exercise, but as the pressure kept mounting from him, Dumbledore grew genuinely interested and curious.

"Years ago, you would have supported a man like Potter," Dumbledore noted evenly as he tapped his desk with one finger. "What's changed?"

"Years ago, Potter wasn't tearing through a country with wizards and witches at his beck and call," Flamel replied dryly. "While I still think a lot of good can be had with wizard-Muggle integration, I do not believe in the peace Potter is offering. It is a peace built on a mountain of corpses and over rivers of blood—it cannot come to pass," he stated firmly.

Dumbledore kept his eyes on his long-time friend, hating himself a little for the mistrust he was feeling towards his one-time colleague. Yet, mistrust he had to, as a preliminary round of investigations within the Ministry, after the Malfoy scandal, had shown that the Muggles had quite a number of spies buried deep within the infrastructure—many of them unthinkable in their identities.

Thus, if the Ministry was infiltrated, why couldn't he entertain the notion that his Order of the Phoenix had been as well? After all, he had a spy in the Death Eaters; how arrogant would he have to be to think his own security impenetrable?

"We'll need to consult the Order leadership," he judged at last, steepling his hands in thought. "This is a major policy decision, and I can't be arbitrary on this—too many people would have to sacrifice quite a bit of their normal lives to accommodate such a shift."

Flamel nodded. "I understand," he replied honestly. "You'll have a tough time selling it, Albus, but trust me—it's the right choice," he insisted.

"And what of the Ministry workers who aren't corrupt?" asked the aged headmaster.

"We offer them a place," Flamel replied easily enough with a shrug. "The Ministry's more of a front for a functioning government than an actual force to be reckoned with, at this point. Between the Death Eaters and Potter's own spies, more than half of the Ministry has either been bought out, framed, or gotten themselves bullied into servitude. Maybe a handful of them are still clean—Arthur Weasley for one."

"And Scrimgeour?" asked Dumbledore innocently. He knew the reaction it would elicit in his friend, and he wasn't at all disappointed when Flamel's eyes darkened.

"Scrimgeour is a political creature, Albus," Flamel reminded him tersely.

"He is also incorruptible and a staunch fighter against the Dark," Albus countered calmly. "His approval ratings, at the very least, are still quite amazingly high for a Minister for Magic."

"He's riding on Amelia's policies, and you know it, Albus," Flamel replied stubbornly. "He's done nothing amazing of his own during his time in office."

"Keeping wise policy decisions from past administrations is wisdom in itself, Nicholas," the centenarian wizard once again countered his friend. "…yes…he could be useful in that respect…I believe we

should give him a place in our new path, if it comes to that," he mused.

Flamel, seeing that he wouldn't win this argument, merely fixed his long-time friend and colleague a stern glare before nodding once in resignation. "Fine. Do whatever you want," he conceded. "Mark my words, though, he'll be nothing but trouble."

Dumbledore shrugged. "One man's trouble is another man's gain," he recited calmly as he watched Flamel huff and then leave the room.

He understood Flamel's animosity for Scrimgeour—it was an animosity many shared; particularly those who believed the righteous path should have no forks. Yet, it was impossible to deny that Scrimgeour had his own brand of intellect that Dumbledore felt the Order was sorely lacking: political know-how. Sure, he personally had navigated many political channels in his day, but he had always kept the politics at arm's length, resulting in quite a few toes being treaded on and a lot of sensibilities offended. In his zeal to remain above reproach, he had isolated himself from quite a bit of political understanding, which Scrimgeour had plenty of. With the current Minister for Magic on board, Dumbledore knew they could soothe over any political issues much easier than if he tried to do it himself. He'd always felt that his skills weren't so much manipulating politics as it was designing grand plans and strategies. He could see the big picture, but he had trouble with the details. With a man like Rufus Scrimgeour on board, perhaps he wouldn't have to worry about the details as well.

Of course, Dumbledore mused, that just left the hardest part: convincing Scrimgeour to work for him.

The Burrow, United Kingdom, July 6th, 2010 (D-Day +516)…

"I hear Dumbledore's planning a big meeting,"

Hermione glanced to her left as she stopped mid-sip, her warm tea cup still up at her lips. As usual, she'd come by to stop and talk to her best friend, while at the same time enjoying the warm hospitality of the Weasleys, even despite the vicious break-up she and Ron had gone through after he'd been caught cheating on her with a fellow Auror.

"Bill told you?" asked the brunette quietly before finally drinking from her cup.

Her friend shook her head slightly. "Charlie," she corrected her friend. "Bill's been…isolating himself lately. Ever since he got fired from his job at Gringotts."

Hermione shrugged. "It was inevitable, you know; passing information to Dumbledore and also confirming Potter's use of Goblin steel would have had any other person killed," she observed. "Bill got lucky on account of Dumbledore there."

"Doesn't mean he likes it," her companion responded with a dry chuckle. "I'll bet he's probably bored out of his mind, hence the isolation. Too much brilliance in that mind of his to stay still. Curse breaking helped in that respect."

"What about a job teaching?" suggested Hermione.

"Too dull," was the instant response, followed by an amused chuckle. "His words, not mine."

"He could always work for the Department of Mysteries, if he wants practical applications to his work," Hermione pointed out.

"Too secretive," again, instant reply. "Why do you think he was a Curse Breaker? He likes the limelight," she chuckled, amused by her brother's needs for attention.

"Your brother's a hard man to please, then," Hermione observed, giving up.

Her friend giggled. "He is that," she agreed, before sobering up, leaving only a small smile on her face as she gazed at the rather large backyard her family home possessed. "So, what's the meeting about?" she asked bluntly.

"Dunno."

A sidelong glance. "Liar," came the immediate accusation.

Hermione shrugged. "You know full well I can't disclose that sort of information to anyone outside the inner circle," she noted calmly.

"You told me about the Death Eater ambush," her friend pointed out.

Hermione eyed her friend. "Fat load of good that did you," she commented dryly, waving at the wheelchair Ginny was sitting in. "How're the legs, by the way?"

Ginny sighed. "They're coming along, as the Healers say," was the bland response. "The attack was more vicious than I'd anticipated."

"And yet Potter got away practically scot-free," Hermione observed.

"Potter's a survivor," Ginny informed her friend. "And considering I had arrested him, I can understand why he chose not to help me immediately," she added.

"Sympathy for the enemy, Ginny?" asked Hermione, surprised. "You know what Kingsley says about that."

"Kingsley is a good man, but too caught up in his black-and-white view of the world," Ginny commented as she looked up to the blue sky. "But I don't blame him, either. He's lost much fighting the Death Eaters. Makes a man hard in spirit, that does."

Hermione didn't answer, settling instead for drinking from her cup while the tea remained warm. A moment of silence passed between the two women before Hermione broke it at last.

"No specifics, and it didn't come from me," she stated bluntly, not even bothering to see if Ginny was paying attention. She was. She always was.

"Of course."

"Dumbledore's had a meeting recently—someone in his confidence, even more so than the inner circle. From what I can gather, it's made Dumbledore reevaluate his priorities some," she informed Ginny. "That's the meeting's agenda. Apparently, he wants to put the new priorities to a vote."

"I'm guessing I've not been invited, once again?" asked the redhead with a forlorn smile.

Hermione confirmed her suspicion with a shake of her head. "Unfortunately not," Hermione said. "Your failure to retrieve Potter aside, Dumbledore feels you've been too exposed to Potter's influence, and that as a result, your current mindset is clearly not in the best interests of the organization," she relayed candidly before drinking from her cup again. She then grabbed the pitcher next to her and refilled her cup, enjoying the smooth, soothing smell of brewed tea.

"This probably has to do with the Longbottom incident, then," Ginny concluded, her fists tightening ever so slightly on the armrests of her wheelchair. "I'm not wrong, you know."

"About Potter being responsible for those rumors that led to Neville and Draco's alleged confrontation?" Hermione asked for confirmation rhetorically. They both knew that was exactly what Ginny was talking about. She nodded then. "I know. I agree."

"Dumbledore doesn't," Ginny pointed out bitterly.

Hermione sighed as she placed her half-full cup onto the stainless steel platter next to her. "For Dumbledore to admit that Potter is behind everything you accredit to him, Ginny, would mean he would have to admit that he's finally met his match," she informed her friend, knowing full well the redhead had probably arrived at that conclusion on her own already. "Even worse: that perhaps he is being outclassed. Such thoughts do not contribute to our success if they fester in the thoughts of our leader."

"He's blinding himself," Ginny pointed out. "One day, if Potter ever blindsides us, we'll be taken completely by surprise. Then what'll we do?"

Hermione sighed. "I know, Gin, but what can we do?" she asked, once again, rhetorically. "If Dumbledore's set, he's set."

A sidelong glance from the redhead. "Not if you intercede for me."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise. "You want me to back you up before the Order?" she asked dubiously. "That'll practically assure that Ronald will vote against you; and with him, his faction."

Ginny shrugged. "From my calculations, his people can be outvoted if you can convince McGonagall and Kingsley," she countered. "If you bring those two on board, the nay-sayers would have their factions overwhelmed."

"The Weasleys have always voted together, though," Hermione pointed out. "You're asking me to help you break years of voting tradition. It's very risky—no telling how this'll play out."

"Ron's got his head up his arse," Ginny said dismissively. "He's got brains, but he doesn't use them, and whenever he does, he never takes an idea as far as it should. Yet, for all that, he's blind to his faults and takes credit whenever he can, so his popularity is still quite solid. If we can get the Order to revamp its priority list by shunning Ron, then I say we do it," she stated firmly. "This is too important to leave to tradition."

Hermione gazed at Ginny for a moment, observing and analyzing her body language. She then raised an eyebrow in stifled surprise. "You're serious about this. You're really willing to go against your own brother."

"I backed you up once before, remember?" Ginny asked with an impish smile.

Hermione blushed a bit as she reminisced about her break-up with Ron, a year ago. She'd never been a social butterfly at Hogwarts, and yet Ginny had sought her out in friendship during third year, bringing Hermione into a rather interesting social group consisting of most of Hogwart's most eccentric or shy figures, as well as quite a few popular kids. Anyone else would've been hard pressed to make such a group function well within itself, but Ginny had handled it skillfully, resulting in Hermione graduating from Hogwarts with some good memories.

Still, their friendship during school hadn't guaranteed Ginny's backing when Ron and she had broken up. It hadn't been pretty—she'd caught Ron cheating on her one night after work, resulting in a whole slew of lies coming out into the open. At the time, both were

medium-ranked members of the Order of the Phoenix, and so their feud had touched the organization as well, resulting in Dumbledore having to interfere. She had been reassigned to his inner circle—mostly handling any legal troubles the members would have in the course of their duties—while Ron had been reassigned to working in the field, thus minimizing any contact they had with each other, except when their Ministry jobs crossed paths, as she was nominally still a prosecutor for the Ministry and Ron was an Auror.

Surprisingly, though, Ginny had backed Hermione all the way, despite Charlie's initial support for Ron, and the Twins' reluctance to take sides—even if they did like Hermione better than Ron. Bill had been casually disinterested, while Percy had just ignored everything. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, however, had decided to just pretend like nothing had ever happened, and continued to treat her well.

The battle-lines weren't as obvious nowadays, thankfully. Neither Ron nor she could say, for certain, that they had any of the Weasley's certain support—except for Hermione and Ginny. Thus, she sort of owed her friend for the continuous loyalty.

"Fine, I'll have a chat with Kingsley and Minerva," she conceded as she brought her tea cup to her lips once more. "No promises, though."

Ginny smiled, resting her hands on her lap as she watched the pretty scenery before her. It was one of the advantages of living in a rural zone, she supposed. "I'm not asking for any," she replied easily.

Hogwarts, United Kingdom, July 30th, 2010 (D-Day +540)…

Many people love to say that a particular piece of news stunned them into silence. Many of those anecdotes, of course, tend to be exaggerations made to symbolize the importance of the news. However, there are indeed a few occasions where the impact of the event can actually stun an entire audience into silence.

July 30th, 2010, was such an event.

"There is no question that these facts are entirely truthful and devoid of exaggeration," Dumbledore read out loud from the report in his hands, his weak grip barely holding onto the parchment. His audience, for their part, was entirely stunned into silence. He

couldn't blame them—were he not the one reading, he might have been stunned into silence as well.

"In a campaign that lasted only a single week, the Eastern Army of Spain has been decisively crushed at Zaragoza," he read, his voice trailing off as he finished the sentence.

Eventually, he too was silent before the facts laid out before him. Eastern Spain had been the only unconquerable stumbling block before the British forces during all this time. Many opponents to the British efforts had come to count on the Eastern Spanish regions to hold out indefinitely, and just a week ago, that had actually seemed feasible.

"Im-Impossible!" protested the Order's spy in the Death Eaters, Severus Snape. "No matter how powerful the Muggle forces are, there is no way that the Spanish army at Zaragoza could be so decisively beaten in a single week!"

Dumbledore waved the parchment in his hands about weakly. "I am merely reading the report, Severus," he reminded the sallow man. "And our source is one of our most reliable Spanish informants."

"Nonetheless, Headmaster, we cannot be expected to swallow such news on a matter of trust alone," Arthur Weasley noted, this time siding with Snape. It was an unusual alliance, but given the circumstances, he wasn't that ready to accept such a mind-boggling win in such a short time.

"I agree, Dumbledore," Algie Longbottom droned out, as though he had been bored by the proceedings—ignoring the fact that he'd been just as stupefied by the news just seconds ago. "Without proof, the Longbottoms will not accept this report as factual."

Dumbledore sighed. Had Augusta not been so antagonistic towards him recently, he would have preferred that she be the representative for the Longbottoms. As it stood, however, he had to deal with the much more cynical Algie.

"If there is proof, then we'll all be able to see it in a few hours," Hermione spoke up then, instantly grabbing everyone's attention. "Such a victory would undoubtedly raise the people's morale, so the military regime will want to broadcast it via television and radio."

There had been a time when "television" and "radio" would have garnered blank stares. Yet, with the big revelation of mage communities around the world, many had been forced to come face to face with the Muggle contraptions, such that they all understood what Hermione spoke of this time around. They were by no means experts, however, nor did they necessarily know how to use the machines, but they had enough of an understanding to know what they are.

"She has a point," Ron Weasley admitted grudgingly. "A victory of this magnitude will make them want to celebrate."

"They won't publicize it," Ginny spoke up then, surprising the group. Ever since her reinstatement to the group, she had taken great care not to rock the boat during meetings. Thus far, that had been easy, as not many important issues came up in which she would have an opinion that went contrary to the group thought. This time, however, she had to correct them. "They can't afford to."

"What are you blathering about?" snapped Severus as he glared at the younger woman. "A victory like this would be just the thing to show off the Muggle Government's power!"

"In the short run, yes, but not in the long run," Ginny countered calmly, keeping her hands clasped before her face as she leaned back into her wheelchair. Though she looked like she wanted to keep speaking, she knew that to do so without an invitation from Dumbledore could spell the end of her reinstatement.

Fortunately, she had managed to prick Dumbledore's curiosity. "Please elaborate, Miss Weasley," the aged wizard requested formally.

"Headmaster! This is preposterous!"

Dumbledore fixed the naysayer with a disapproving stare. "If it is, then the logic will not hold up to scrutiny," he chided. "But if it isn't, then we will be all the wiser thanks to Miss Weasley's conclusions," he added, before nodding to Ginny to go on.

Ginny nodded back, somewhat surprised at the fact that she'd been given her five minutes to shine once again. "Thank you, Headmaster," she started. "If the government were to publicize the victory, it's true that the world would stand awed by the event and perhaps rethink their opinion of the British government, despite the massive casualties incurred during the Death Eater raid."

She raised a finger to halt any comments thus far. "However, it would also place a big target on the British nation," she added then with a knowing smile. "A military victory so decisive will undoubtedly bring them awe and respect, but also fear and hate. Those most threatened by the rise of the British nation will start becoming hostile to the government, and thus their losses will be greater than their gains."

"How does one censor the conquest of a region?" demanded Dean Thomas, who had both been her boyfriend at one point, but also headed the Order's identification forging section thanks to his considerable skill as an artist. There wasn't a passport or identification card he couldn't replicate, even without magic.

"Simple, you don't advance your lines," Ginny explained. "If we assume they'll hold back on the news, then it stands to reason that the military will similarly do its utmost to hold back their front lines, so as to give themselves more time to lessen the other nations' suspicions."

"Why not expose the ploy?" asked Ron at that point. "The ramifications against the Muggle government would be catastrophic."

"Except, it'll hurt us too," Hermione countered, giving Ginny a look of dawning understanding. "If we reveal the details of the ploy, the other nations' suspicion and fear will rise dramatically in a short period of time. The most threatened of them will thus mobilize to contain the UK immediately."

Ginny nodded. "With the excuse of releasing the Muggle government from the thrall of us mages, any country could feasibly invade us in a month. What keeps them in check, however, are the five hundred thousand troops in Spain and the rumors of Military Mages," she added, pleased that Hermione had seen her point. While the brunette was indisputably smarter than her in almost every

academic field known to man, this was a field that Ginny had come to love and thrive in, whereas Hermione's principles held her back from fully embracing military doctrine.

"But that would be the Muggles' war, not ours," Snape pointed out. "Why should we care?"

"Because to make due on their alleged goal, they would hunt us down," Hermione answered for her friend. "If the other countries allege that they will be invading to purge mage influence on the government, they'll have to take everyone with magical powers down just to be on the safe side," she explained. "Add to that the fact that such a cassus belli would make the public feel as though the attacks are justified, and we're left in a rather dangerous position."

"What I don't understand is how keeping the lines back will cover up for the massive victory they've just achieved," Arthur Weasley pointed out. "I mean, couldn't reporters just cross the lines and see the truth for themselves? Don't the Muggles have don't camera thingies in the sky? Wouldn't the Spanish forces surrender?"

Ginny shook her head. "If we assume that the British keep their lines back, then reporters will be unwilling to move beyond them, as they will assume that if the British troops won't march forward, then it isn't safe," she explained. "As for Spanish reporters, it's well known that the Spanish government in Barcelona has been censoring the press heavily. This sort of defeat will be hushed up as well."

"As for satellites," Hermione stressed the word, wishing the group were more familiar with non-magical technology, "the British could argue that they feel the Spanish withdrawal is a trap, so they're staying put. However, only the French and other European nations would bring it up, if they feel so inclined, and they are probably more worried about using their satellite capabilities to hunt down rogue mages in their own jurisdictions than to question happenings in the Anglo-Spanish at the moment."

"How did the defeat happen to begin with?" demanded one of the newer members of the group. "Wasn't Eastern Spain supposed to be nigh impregnable?"

Dumbledore scanned the message briefly before shaking his head. "The message is non-specific as to how it occurred, only that it did," he informed his audience."

"Military mages," Hermione broke in then, grabbing everyone's attention. "It has to be. Potter and his military mages finally took to the field."

Ginny thumbed her lips pensively—a habit she had picked up from Harry Potter when she'd visited him in prison. "It makes sense," she agreed. "The Spanish government, being highly reactionary and conservative, has been at odds with the Spanish Ministry of Magic from the beginning, so they wouldn't have any defenses against the Military Mages."

"If that's true, then what are we supposed to do?" asked another member. "While the Muggles become even more powerful, all we're doing is sitting here!"

Ginny eyed the man who'd spoken out appreciatively. It was good to know she wasn't the only one who thought that way in the group. "We must strengthen our forces as well," she concluded. "If we are to survive in this new age, it is the only way."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement before looking to his left to his unusually taciturn friend, Nicholas Flamel. "What do you think, Nicholas?" asked the wizened Headmaster.

The even more aged wizard was silent for a moment before nodding in agreement. "I believe Miss Weasley is correct. As we stand, we are a laughable threat to the Muggle government, and thus to Potter. If we increased our forces, however, we would be able to stand as equals before any negotiating table," he reasoned. "Thankfully, there is a large supply of wizards and witches roaming the Isles right now."

Charlie Weasley sighed as he shook his head pessimistically. "We're trying to recruit as many of them as we can, but so far, we're hitting a dead-end in regards to the language barrier," he interjected then. "My Romanian, for instance, is shoddy at best, and we only have Hermione for French. Add to that the fact that we have no one speaking German or Spanish, or even Italian or Mandarin, and we're finding ourselves practically communicating through sign language!"

Hermione nodded in agreement with the second oldest Weasley sibling. "Our lack of translators is hindering our recruitment process," she added to Charlie's complaint. "Not just recruitment, but operational as well. Without people fluent enough in foreign languages, we can't even organize a simple mission, let alone a major offensive against our enemies."

"Sadly, it appears that most of our better skilled people have been lured away by Potter," Ron spat in disgust. "It took some time to find out where they were, but we've now confirmed that many of the wizards and witches considered experts in their fields were smuggled out of the country by the Potters."

"Unwillingly?" asked Dumbledore, hopeful.

Ron shook his head, causing Dumbledore to sag. "Apparently, they don't smuggle out anyone who doesn't want to join their cause," he reported. "So we'll be hard pressed to find a spy within their ranks."

"Isn't there some spell that can translate for us?" asked another member, frustrated.

Flamel fixed the man with a look. "If there is, then no one's received the memo," he deadpanned. Idiot, he didn't say. "If we can return to reality, however, I would suggest we assign a few of our numbers to dedicate themselves wholly to becoming translators—at least, until we can achieve some measure of integration with our foreign allies."

"We're short on manpower as it is, any further segmentation of our cells would be catastrophic to our effectiveness as a group," Bill Weasley, the eldest of the Weasley children and probably the only person who didn't want to be there, spoke up. "No one's got the free time to take on another load."

"Not even yourself?" asked Kingsley archly. "If I recall correctly, you are currently unemployed, no?"

Bill glared at the man. "I'm experimenting with ward spells. Do you know how volatile those are if one does not give it one's full attention?" he snapped back.

"Easy now, gentlemen," Dumbledore smoothly interrupted the growing argument between the two wizards. Honestly, since Bill had gotten fired from Gringotts, he had been surly and directionless, forcing Dumbledore to interrupt quite a few rows.

Thankfully, both men backed down at Dumbledore's interruption, though the bitter glare that Bill was throwing Kingsley now and again told the centenarian wizard that the veteran Auror's slight wouldn't be forgotten anytime soon.

"Regardless of our personal duties, I'm afraid that Kingsley is quite right," Ginny smoothly inserted herself into the conversation once again. "If we plan to go toe-to-toe with the likes of Potter, we need additional manpower, and assimilating the foreigners seeking refuge in the UK is the best way to do so quickly."

She felt bad when she watched Bill's bitter look get aimed her way, but she had to put the interests of the cause above her brother's dispute. She loved him dearly, and still thought of him as her favourite brother, but in this case, he was unfortunately wrong.

Maybe, in a sense, Dumbledore was correct in his fears that she was obsessed with Potter, but that was an obsession born uniquely out of fascination rather than attraction. Potter had torn her world down and was now using the ashes of that destructive act to rebuild the world to his image—or so she believed. She truly had no evidence one way or another, but she was certain that the person most benefiting from the current state of affairs was Harry Potter, and that everything that went wrong for the Ministry of Magic and the Order of the Phoenix was somehow tied to him.

That meant that he saw them as a threat, which inevitably would result in open conflict between his forces and the reeling Magical World. Considering Potter had a five hundred thousand strong army whom he was, she believed, working on influencing to his side, that meant that she had to convince her colleagues that they needed greater numbers on their side if they hoped to even match his considerable forces.

She knew he would never acquiesce to being a mere servant for all his life—there was no way that was possible, not with that look in his eyes. He was a man aiming for the top, and if she was to stop him, she had to move quick.

The game was on, and the clock was ticking.

London, United Kingdom, August 5th, 2010 (D-Day +546)…

"He's getting better."

Hermione looked up from her desk at Ginny's observation, even as the redhead drank from her cup as she faced the sole window looking out of Hermione's study. "Potter?" she asked unnecessarily.

Regardless, Ginny nodded in confirmation as she set her cup back down on its plate. "Zaragoza shouldn't have fallen so quickly, even with the Military Mages," she reasoned. "It was too well dug-in; the Eastern Army had ample experience fighting him before he got caught."

Hermione shrugged as she looked back down at her work—a particularly dull deposition she had to look over before a trial the next day. "Maybe it was someone else's plan," she suggested idly.

Ginny glanced her way with a flat expression. "You don't even believe that."

Hermione nodded her head slightly. "You're right, I don't," she confirmed as she wrote down her notes on the document. "But someone's got to ask the unnecessary questions, or else we might well be overlooking someone important in his camp."

"We know who the major players are," Ginny reminded her. "Francis White; his cover uncle and a major player in Parliament…" she noted.

"Baron Warwick, his House of Lords backer, media propagandist, and major funds provider," Hermione continued idly, as though she was merely reciting from memory, which she incidentally was.

"The Goblins, another major source of funds."

"His immediate superiors in the Army; likely to pave the way for his control of the Expeditionary Forces."

"Half the bloody government's on his payroll or his uncle's, especially true now that they've been recruiting like mad and White clinched the job of overseeing the recruitment efforts."

Hermione nodded, finally putting down her pen. "And let's not forget he's practically confirmed having spies in the Ministry of Magic, too," she added.

"We've got to assume he's also been recruiting witches and wizards outside of the UK, too," Ginny opined as she leaned into her wheelchair and observed the changing color of the sky as dusk settled in. "It'd be too dumb of him not to."

"And given his wide availability of talent and staff, that means he'll have a much easier time integrating them into his power structure," Hermione reasoned from Ginny's observation. "Whereas we're bogged down on translation issues and incompatibility of laws and customs."

"Which means he's not only got a single step on us, but a whole bloody mile," Ginny concluded, looking a little depressed. "Makes one wonder whether it's even possible to win."

"He's good, but he's not invincible," Hermione pointed out. "Remember the ambush in Spain? The one where the Spanish were helped out by a Ministry witch?" she asked. "His after-combat medical report says he nearly died of his wounds. Had to cauterize his own wounds to survive as long as he did, and that nearly killed him by itself."

"And with anyone else, that might be reassurance enough, Mione, but with Potter…" Ginny countered, her voice trailing off mid-sentence.

Hermione leaned her head into an open palm and gazed at her friend inquisitively. "Are you sure Dumbledore's not a little right about your fascination with Potter?" she asked carefully.

Ginny nodded once. "I'm sure," she replied honestly. "You weren't there, Mione—in Spain, that is. You didn't get to see him, talk to him, hear the way he reasons, and see his body language," she looked back at Hermione with a serious expression. "He's unlike anyone else I've ever met. To say he's driven is an understatement—he's

obsessed. Nothing short of absolute, confirmed death would keep him from getting back up and trying again."

"Obsessive people make easy foes, in my experience," Hermione noted idly.

"Not when they're as smart as Potter, or as morally callous," Ginny countered, crossing her arms under her chest. "Mione, I really think he'd be willing to sacrifice anyone and anything to reach his goal—and what's worse, I don't know what that is."

"Then he's just like Voldemort," Hermione reasoned as she leaned back into her chair and stretched out her arms. "People like that don't last—they rule through fear, so once the subordinates feel empowered or they see weakness in the leader, they scatter or turn on him."

"Except he rules through respect and loyalty," Ginny informed her friend. "I was there, remember? I saw it in the people who guarded him in Spain. They all looked at him like he was Merlin himself and as if I was the lowest piece of trash there was. If he did rule through fear, don't you think his being in prison—effectively a deprivation of power—would have made them turn on him?"

Hermione stayed silent for a moment before nodding. "I see your point," she conceded. "Which explains why you fear he's already miles ahead of us. If he's capable of retaining such loyalty through imprisonment and the attacks, then he's already got a large support base, and that's likely to increase exponentially now that he's back on the front lines."

"Exactly," Ginny confirmed with a single nod, her gaze back on the sunset outside.

Hermione sighed, putting up a hand to her face to rub her temples with the tip of her fingers. "One would think that the chaos in London and throughout the world would slow him down," she griped.

"He thrives on it," Ginny said with a forlorn smile. "The more chaos there is, the more power he gets as he convinces the higher authorities to delegate to him. How else did he get the Military Mages placed under his command, despite the attacks?"

Hermione sighed. "A fair point," she conceded again. "Then the only way to stop him is to catch up, since we can't fix the chaos that empowered him in the first place," she reasoned.

"Exactly."

A small smile spread on Hermione's lips then. "Then I think I have an idea."

Brighton, United Kingdom, August 15th, 2010 (D-Day +556)…

"As far as ideas go, Mione, this was brilliant," Ginny commended her friend as she watched numerous mages walk out of the International Portkey Travel, Arrival Terminal in Brighton.

Hermione grinned at her friend before crossing her arms and smiling self-assuredly. "Thanks," she replied simply.

The duo waited until the lead wizard of the group neared them before Hermione raised a hand in greeting, which was quickly returned by the leader of the magical group.

"Thanks for coming, Viktor," Hermione thanked the man.

The Bulgarian wizard gave Hermione a tight, confident smile as he gave her a brief salute. "Anything for the beautiful princess of Hogwarts," the former Bulgarian All-Star Quidditch player answered smoothly.

Hermione's cheeks briefly pinked up at the compliment, but otherwise she kept her cool at the man's charming demeanour. "Your English has gotten quite excellent, Viktor," she complimented him before motioning to Ginny, who still sat in her wheelchair at her side. "You remember my friend Ginny, yes?"

Viktor extended his hand and shook Ginny's offered hand in greeting. "How could I not? I believe the last time we spoke, you threatened to render me infertile if I would ever harm Hermione," he joked.

Ginny, unlike Hermione, was not quite as restrained with her reactions, and grinned, amused, at the reminder of that particularly memorable talk, back in their Hogwarts days. "I'm glad to see it was

so memorable that you both remembered it then, and now," she jibed right back.

Viktor laughed at the retort before flashing her an approving smile. "You have not lost that fiery spirit, I see!" he noted with a grin before looking back at Hermione. "Well then, my dear, I am here, as I said I would be," he then motioned to the group of wizards and witches behind him. "And these are my closest associates, as you requested. What can we do for you, that couldn't be discussed over the Floo or a letter?"

Hermione smiled at him, pleased with his performance, before glancing both ways and motioning for him to follow her. "Not here. Ginny and I booked a room at the Grand Hotel," she informed him.

With a nod, his bemused smile betrayed by the serious curiosity in his stare, the Bulgarian wizard and his associates followed the two British witches to the Grand Hotel, where they quickly ascended to one of the finer rooms at the disposal of the historic building.

Settling in, Viktor regarded his two hosts curiously for a moment before nodding. "Very well, assuming you both feel it is now safe to talk to us, what is this all about?" he asked bluntly. "Pardon my manners, but you understand that you asked for this meeting in a rather…rushed manner, and the trip was not inexpensive."

Hermione nodded, assuming the lead in the meeting. "We appreciate what you've done, Viktor, but we need your help," she told him equally straightforward. "Dumbledore—"

She was stopped by Viktor raising one hand in a halting fashion, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Dumbledore needs us? Then why is he not here?" he asked.

Ginny sighed. "Dumbledore hasn't a clue that we called you, and he's not likely to like that we did, especially without his authorization," she informed him. "He still believes that Durmstrang has been fully compromised by the Death Eaters."

"It has," Viktor informed them rather calmly, causing Ginny to tense and Hermione to look at him in a rather odd fashion. "They took it over two years after I left. Everyone prior to that is relatively

trustworthy," he added then, his expression telling the two witches that he was relishing the way they had reacted to his half-truth.

"Dumbledore hasn't yet made that distinction—too much to lose if he trusts the wrong person," Ginny noted from her wheelchair. "Except, he doesn't realize he can't afford to."

Viktor rested his head on his fist now, giving an indifferent shrug as he did so. "So what does this have to do with me? I do not recall having had a good relationship with the Headmaster of Hogwarts during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and he does not seem to want me around. So why should I care?"

"Because what's coming is a threat that won't just affect him, but all wizardkind," Hermione told him flatly as she crossed her arms under her chest. "You're not dumb, Viktor—I know you know what I'm talking about."

Again, the Bulgarian wizard shrugged. "Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't," he answered vaguely. "Who's to say I haven't been approached already?" he countered, curious to see how the two witches would react.

"You wouldn't be here if you were on his side," Hermione reasoned. "Even if he wanted information on us, this would be too blunt—not his style. He's too fond of being hidden in the shadows—less evidence for us to use against him publicly."

Viktor chuckled. "True," he conceded, before giving the two witches a knowing smile. "Then, you wish to enlist my aid, and that of my associates, against the White Death?" he asked bluntly.

"You mean Potter?" asked Ginny for confirmation. Viktor shrugged.

"Potter, White—are they not both his name?" he asked, bored. "In the Ministry of Magic in Bulgaria, he is known as the White Death, because of his terrifying body count," he informed them darkly. "It was not a name lightly given."

Hermione nodded, paling a little at the infamy Potter was already garnering across the continent. "Then yes, Viktor, we want your help in opposing the White Death," she confirmed.

Viktor did not move from his place, nor did he give the two witches any form of body language that indicated cooperation. Instead, he gave the two a stony gaze and set his lips into a thin line. "Do you understand what you are requesting of me, my dear princesses?" he asked them slowly. "Bulgaria has no desire to intervene in the internal affairs of Britain. Why should I jeopardize my country's neutrality to help you?"

"Because you know Potter won't stop at Britain," Hermione told him flatly as she took a step towards him and towered over his sitting figure. "Spain ought to be proof enough of that."

Viktor looked up at the woman who had, years ago, stolen his affections. As an international Quidditch star, he'd been told countless times that he could get any woman he wanted, and there were certainly enough pretty women in Bulgaria to think he might one day get over the brunette standing in front of him. Yet, today was not that day, and his mind—no idle thing itself—knew she was right.

"You believe, then, that the British halt after Zaragoza was his idea too?" he asked evenly.

Ginny nodded. "It's the only explanation that makes sense. British High Command would have probably loved to have a single, devastating blow delivered to the Spanish government so as to end the war quickly, but only someone with an ulterior agenda, like Potter, would've preferred for the war to be extended."

Viktor again shrugged. "Perhaps," he allowed. "And yet, there is no guarantee, no solid facts, that say he will move further east than Spain," he pointed out. "So again, why should I risk my home getting dragged into this conflict?"

"Because if we don't stop him now, we won't be able to stop him later," Ginny answered firmly. "If your country has heard enough of him to call him the White Death, then what do you think he'll be capable of in a few years, when his influence and position within the British military are solidified?" she asked. "He'll be unstoppable."

Viktor's eyes narrowed as he gazed upon the two witches before him. "He already is," he told them simply.

Hermione started slightly. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, confused.

Viktor sighed as he moved to push himself out of his seat and looked back at his resting associates, none of whom seemed interested in actively participating in the conversation—undoubtedly thinking that he'd be able to handle any issues on his own. "Three weeks ago, the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic, along with a few other Eastern Ministries, dispatched an observational task force to Spain to get a handle of the situation there," he informed them. "Its job, as it were, was primarily to observe the effects of Military Mages in action. As you might now have deduced, I was part of that task force."

"So Eastern Europe is getting worried," Hermione deduced from Viktor's information. "They would have never sent any such task force unless they were anxious about British intentions."

Viktor gave a noncommittal shrug at the observation. "I am not at liberty to discuss the Ministry's worries," he told them frankly. "However, I can say that you're on the right track. Unfortunately, what we saw in Spain was enough to shock my country and others into reticence in confronting the Military Mages," he informed them before shaking his head sadly. "I am sorry, but I cannot cooperate with you on this. Bulgaria has made it clear that it wants nothing to do with the British forces, both offensively and defensively. The Ministry, unfortunately, concurs."

Hermione took a few steps forward until she was but inches from the former Quidditch Star-turned-Ministry Hit Wizard. With the increasing instability throughout Europe caused by the Big Reveal, the regional Ministries had all but conscripted the very best of their societies into their policing ranks.

"Viktor, you know Potter needs to be stopped now," she pleaded with him.

Viktor again shrugged, although it was easy to see he was uncomfortable with so easily dismissing Hermione. "I am sorry, my fair princess," he apologized sincerely. "If it were to up us," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards his associates, who had been quietly listening in on the conversation. "We would stand with you in this fight, but I cannot risk drawing Bulgaria into a war she cannot win."

Viktor raised his hands and put them on Hermione's shoulders, bowing his head apologetically as he did so. "I am truly sorry," he repeated himself before looking over his shoulder at his people and barking out, "Ние сме напускане!"

With scattered nods and grunts, the people who had accompanied Viktor got to their feet and gave brief thanks to Ginny and Hermione for the accommodations before trailing out of the room, soon leaving Viktor alone with both witches.

Putting his hands back at his sides, Viktor leaned towards Hermione and kissed her on the cheek. "Be well," he told her genuinely. "I am sorry I could not be of more comfort in these trying times," he apologized then to Ginny as he nodded respectfully before leaving.

Ginny sighed. The meeting had gone less productively than she wished it had, but she could understand where Viktor was coming from. Drawing Bulgaria into the Anglo-Spanish War would have catastrophic consequences for the comparatively underdeveloped nation, especially now that the Military Mages had made their power known to the continent and the world at large.

Hermione, for her part, collapsed onto the luxurious bed and lay there, one arm across her eyes to hide her feelings. "That was a disaster," she commented blithely.

Ginny nodded in her wheelchair beside the bed. "Unfortunate, but understandable," she agreed. "We should have seen this sort of reaction coming. There aren't many who would willfully go up against the odds we're proposing without thinking of the consequences."

"Maybe we should have only asked for translators?" Hermione suggested.

Ginny shook her head. "Any help at all would be enough for Potter and his ilk to brand the Ministry as traitors and the Bulgarians as enemies," she reasoned. "Viktor knows this. He can't be seen associating with us any more than he already has."

Hermione sighed aloud again, before descending into silence for a while as both witches digested how badly the meeting had gone, in regards to their agenda.

"What about Beauxbatons and the French Ministry?" asked Ginny then. "Maybe Fleur would use her family to intercede on our behalf before the French authorities?"

Hermione shook her head, her curled hair getting messed up with the friction against the bed sheets. "Week too late," she recounted. "Beauxbatons was closed by the French government, and the Delacours have gone missing after allegedly refusing to register before the French authorities."

"Fled, you reckon?" asked Ginny.

Hermione shook her head. "Arrested, more likely, or killed. Media's full of stories of fanatic right-wingers in France conducting extra-judicial killings of known, unregistered magic users."

Ginny grimaced, finding the news distasteful. "Then we're down on Eastern Europe and France," she concluded, feeling a little depressed at how many of their attempted counter-plans to Potter's actions were failing. "That leaves Ireland."

Hermione had a doubtful expression on her face. "Do you really think they'll agree?" she asked dubiously. "They've no more reason to help us than Viktor."

Ginny shook her head in disagreement. "On the contrary, they've probably been feeling the threat of Potter and the British more acutely than anyone else," she countered. "If Britain does fall to Potter, who do you think will be his next target? France? Unlikely—his military strength may be strong, but Potter's no fool. He needs to neutralize any flanking threats before going for the biggest power on the continent," she reasoned.

Hermione was silent for a moment, digesting her friend's accurate analysis. To be honest, much of this situation was well beyond her usual spheres of academic interest, so she was content with leaving much of the tactical analysis to Ginny, who seemed to have a better mind for this. In a perfect world, she would have thought Ron to be a better candidate, given his adoration for tactics, be they on the

Quidditch field, on a chessboard, or while working for the Aurors. However, their relationship had been irreparably damaged by his infidelity, and as far as she knew, Ginny and her brother were barely on speaking terms as a result.

Sighing, she closed her eyes as her mind came to a sole conclusion. "Seamus, then?"

Ginny nodded from her place beside the bed, her thin fingers interwoven on top of her lap. "Seamus," she confirmed, hoping her other former boyfriend would agree to their request.

Liverpool, United Kingdom, September 10th, 2010 (D-Day +582)…

Maybe it was divine providence, or perhaps it was just dumb luck, but Seamus did agree to intervene on their behalf before a few Irish colleagues he had from the old days. Moreover, the talks had, unlike those with the Bulgarians, gone well, culminating with an unofficial agreement from many Irish officials to cooperate regarding information exchange and translations with the Order of the Phoenix.

The problem, however, was that the Order's newest allies were way ahead regarding their analysis of Harry Potter's potential threat to their way of life and, while they had managed to convince the Irish government of their status as a non-threat, they didn't think Potter would let that slide if, or rather when he took power in Britain.

This, notably, made them quite vocal proponents of eliminating Potter immediately, rather than later. Dumbledore, however, was firm in his position that unless Potter was deemed beyond redemption, he would never lend his agreement or support in an assassination attempt on the man's life.

This was a huge problem for Ginny, as it meant that Seamus kept pestering her regarding the Irish delegation's discontent with Dumbledore's leadership, while Hermione relayed to her the irritation being felt by the more orthodox Order members, who saw the Irish demands as unwanted interference in the traditional Order power structure.

On the plus side, however, the Irish agreement to provide professional-grade translators had allowed the Order to recruit more people in the days since, resulting in Order recruit intakes going up

by 300% over the usual rate. The problem now became where to lodge all these new people, as most of them were refugees from the Continent who'd come to Britain to escape persecution. The Muggle government, however, wanted no part in housing the refugees, and claimed this was a Ministry matter due to their magical nature. The Ministry, on the other hand, was adamant that magical refugees fell under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, arguing that the national governments on the Continent and elsewhere were persecuting their magical populations—a charge that the British government rejected as baseless, and which the United Nations, without any representative from the magical community to argue for their cause, also dismissed.

The result was that the British government had passed a law requiring the Ministry of Magic to house and police any magical person or creature that refused to register with the Muggle authorities, but only as long as the full breadth of the British national registration system was still in the works. After it were finished, registration would be compulsory, on pain of imprisonment.

As far as laws went, it was among the most lenient in Europe regarding the status of magical persons.

This did little to alleviate Ginny's headache, however, as it meant that, thanks to her connections to Seamus and Hermione, she was looked at as the person in charge of foreign relations, and the demands from the refugee community were mounting without any seeming solution in sight.

Hogsmeade alone had seen its population rise explosively, to the point where it was impossible to hide the village with magic anymore. Not that it could be called a village, at this point—it had all the makings of a major town, or small city; at least, wizard-wise. With the fall of the magic wards, however, there now was the problem that the major settlement's location had been leaked to the Muggles, which had caused quite a large crowd of angry protesters and bigots to accumulate nearby, demanding that the mages surrender to the state or leave.

A few of them even demanded the outright extermination of all magic users.

Tensions had thus risen daily until Dumbledore had acquiesced the town's relocation to within Hogwarts grounds, and the gates leading out of the valley were torn down and rebuilt to accommodate the bigger threat. Hogwarts was now effectively isolated from the outside world, a small city-state within the United Kingdom.

That was the problem, really. There were numerous other city-states rising across the islands, though more and more of them were being forced to move further north into Scotland as England, Wales, and Northern Ireland came under the strict controls enacted by the military government in power. Well, ostensibly, it was still a civilian government sitting in Westminster, but the real power, everyone knew, lay in the hands of the military.

Regardless, it made for a very difficult position for the mages to have. The Ministry of Magic, already under government audit for suspicious administrative practices, had been forced to relocate many of their operatives from London to the growing townships across Scotland. It didn't help that many of these towns had grown so fast that they too were forced to fortify their town limits as a precaution against Muggle raids.

Perhaps the largest indicator of how bad things had gotten was the fact that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had finally been ordered to shut down operations as an educational facility. The order had come from the government three days ago, and the news had crushed many a teacher, student, or aspiring student. The school had been predictably deemed "unsafe, not in line with the national curriculum, and in violation of several educational and children's welfare statutes," none of which could be proved wrong as a result of the danger that a Muggle would face trying to navigate the eccentric building.

Scrimgeour's government had heavily protested, of course. They argued that Hogwarts fell within regulations enacted by the Ministry, and that the castle was perfectly safe. The problem was, however, that as the Ministry was under government audit, most, if not all of its legislation—past and present—were being suspended and effectively replaced with their Muggle counterparts. Thus, legally, the Muggle government was right.

Thus, the teachers of Hogwarts were suspended from providing standardized education to their students, and Dumbledore had his

license as Headmaster suspended pending official investigation by the Department of Education. As a private school, it shouldn't have had this much trouble with the government, but as the Ministry of Magic was the one to give them their educational license, it had been equally suspended, thus falling within Muggle purview.

As a result, education had reverted to home schooling, which was one thing that the Muggles couldn't prevent. However, it made for many a frustrated parent and many unemployed former teachers, all of whom couldn't be hired as "teachers," per se, but had to do a whole song and dance routine so that they could be hired by each household as "domestic consultants." Even then, they couldn't actually teach the children, but had to make them learn by casually performing, repeatedly, banal housework and talking to themselves in a loud voice regarding magical theory.

In short, it was ridiculous, but with the wards down, there was the very serious risk that if the Muggles believed the witches and wizards were in rebellion, they would bomb the valley and every other rising town into a crater preemptively. It was better, then, to simply bow their heads for now while they worked on making improved wards, courtesy of her brother, Bill.

Right now, however, she had to go and justify her decision to have part of the Lake built over artificially to accommodate another district, as the explosive population expansion was rapidly swallowing up the land around the castle.

Notably, the Merpeople had voiced their (shrill) displeasure to Dumbledore, and he had wanted her to justify herself before him and a few of her peers.

"It's not that we don't understand why you wish to expand the settlement, Miss Weasley," McGonagall, ever Dumbledore's trusted second, said soothingly, "but rather why you decided to expand it over the Lake, of all places."

Ginny nudged her thumb towards the window. "Unfortunately, it's the only place left for suitable, short run expansion," she told the group before her, which included Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, Hermione, Ron, and Shacklebolt. "By just setting up the necessary foundations into the lakebed, we can hold up a decent district in a short period of time, compared to reclaiming settlement lands from

the Forbidden Forest, and inciting the displeasure of the centaurs, who are already on tense terms with us as it is."

"The Merpeople have inhabited the Black Lake for centuries, Miss Weasley; surely, you can understand their aggravation with such artificial defiling," Dumbledore spoke next. "I'm sure that the centaurs could be negotiated with to allow our boundaries to expand further into Forest grounds."

Ginny sighed. It wasn't a secret that many of the magical community, whether Dumbledore or the humblest cobbler, had some measure of prejudice against the Centaurs. It wasn't hard to harbor that sort of resentment against a race that was almost always antagonistic and arrogant. However, unlike the Merpeople, Centaurs were harder to control, and if they were pushed any further, they were just as likely to initiate raids on the growing settlement.

"We already tried," Ron interjected then, to the surprise of all involved. "We needed to accommodate a new training field near the forest boundaries to train our newest recruits, but they threatened retribution if the Forest boundaries were breached. They see it as their natural home, and won't give it up anytime soon," he reported as he leaned back into his chair and crossed his arms, his gaze on his sister. "I think Ginny's got the right idea. The Merpeople haven't had to sacrifice anything as of yet, while everyone else has. Let them swallow their pride."

"I…agree," Hermione was slow to provide her agreement, given the fact that her ex had lent his. "The Merpeople are reasonable creatures. I'm sure we could convince them that we won't expand further than a certain amount over the lake."

Flitwick was unnaturally calm as he pondered the arguments being offered. "What about magical expansion?" he asked, his squeaky voice tempered by gravity.

Ginny looked at Hermione, who was technically in charge of actually making the settlements—she personally just decided where.

Her friend was quick to come to her defense, thankfully. "Each district has been put under as much magical expansion as they can handle," the witch reported. "Anything further will just cause the

current spells to degrade over time, and the end result would be…bad," she concluded euphemistically.

Flitwick nodded, tapping his entwined hands with one, loose finger. "Very well then," he eventually said, leaning back as well and folding his hands on his tiny lap. "I agree with Miss Weasley's proposal as well."

Three votes for, three unspoken. She needed just one more to get the proposal through. She glanced at Dumbledore, then at McGonagall. While the elderly witch was infamous for being of independent mind, the loss of her career—indeed, the outright rejection of her career's usefulness towards her pupils—by the Muggle government had been a devastating blow to her pride and ego. So much so that she was often seen agreeing numbly with whatever Dumbledore said. It was a damned shame, but as there was no way to get her license back without first undergoing a grueling, vicious review by the Department of Education, they had to resign themselves that this broken shell of a formidable woman would be a constant fixture for some time yet.

"Against," Dumbledore simply said—no surprise there. The Merpeople had been his traditional allies and had been a fantastic source of information whenever he needed discreet scouts in areas with rivers, lakes, or seaside.

"Against," McGonagall said simply, though Ginny could easily see the vacant, broken look in her eyes. Not surprising at all there either.

Shacklebolt, however, was the real swing vote here. He was as taciturn as he was imposing, and his only allegiance seemed to be to what he personally believed was the greater good. That meant that neither Dumbledore nor Ginny could predict what he would do—only that it would be what Shacklebolt believed to be the "right" choice.

The bald, black man seemed to understand that he was being waited on, but made no hurry in voicing his vote. He wouldn't be rushed, and no amount of complaining would make him budge from his convictions. Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he closed his eyes and leaned forward his head, such that his chin rested on his collarbone. He pondered the options offered long and hard, his only fear being making the wrong choice.

Eventually, however, he settled on one choice, though he remained in his pondering position. "For," his deep voice rumbled. He then opened his eyes and straightened up in his chair. "Mr. Weasley has made a valid point," he added. "The Merpeople have so far been asked to sacrifice nothing for the benefit of the growing community, while the Centaurs have been made to sacrifice already an acre of Forest grounds. Let the Merpeople shoulder the burden this time around."

Ginny breathed a sigh of relief, though she knew better than to thank the man as though he'd done this as a favor. He hadn't. Shacklebolt would've just as soon voted for the other side than make an executive-level decision on the basis of friendship. That was what made him a great field leader.

She watched as Dumbledore sighed in resignation, while McGonagall had no real change of expression from her blank look. Flitwick seemed uncaring about the whole ordeal, while Ron was glancing towards Hermione before shrugging to himself. Only Hermione seemed genuinely happy for her. Whatever joy was gained, however, was quickly dashed as a prim-looking witch in business robes suddenly opened the door to Dumbledore's office and marched right in, the perfect picture of professionalism. In her hands was what seemed to be a piece of paper that, considering the tense posture the woman was carrying as she handed it over to Dumbledore, gave Ginny a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Sure enough, Dumbledore's features creased into a concerned frown as he perused the document offered to him by the prim witch. "Thank you, Agatha," he mumbled as he took in the paper's contents. After a moment, he looked up at his board colleagues and gave them a flat stare. "We have a new problem," he announced, waving his wand idly and causing the paper to duplicate itself over and over until there were enough copies for all, each copy flying to its new owner.

Each member of the Provisional Governance Board reacted differently to the document. Shacklebolt retained his stony, blank look, though his brows scrunched up together imperceptibly; McGonagall's mouth tightened into a thin line—the most emotion the witch had shown in a week; Ron had reddened and started to curse

under his breath; Flitwick had a grave, troubled look on his face; and Hermione had blanched, obviously a little shaken by the message.

Thankfully, she didn't have to wait long to find out what it was about, as Hermione passed her own copy to her, which Ginny thankfully took, despite the frown from Dumbledore.

It appeared the document wasn't really a document—more of a flyer, or pamphlet.

REGISTRATION IS SALVATION

REFUSAL IS TREASON

Ginny's mouth pursed into a thin line. This wasn't a surprise, but it was worrisome. She had already seen such posters all over London and a few other cities in England, but none ever within magical communities. Those who registered with the Muggle authorities tended to become persona non grata amongst their friends, family, and colleagues, so there were very low odds of a registered wizard or witch living within their community without everyone else knowing about it.

"That's some reach the Muggles have," Shacklebolt noted flatly. "They have a spy within the town."

"There are thousands of copies all over town," the prim witch reported, her concern bleeding through her tone. "Leaflets and posters. The community is demanding answers."

Ginny stayed silent as the board debated amongst itself, carefully analyzing what the group's options were.

"We can't just inform the villagers that the town's security has been compromised," Ron argued. "It's bad enough that the population is on edge from the fact that there are daily mass Muggle gatherings outside the Valley Gate, demanding our surrender. Adding fuel to that fire will just open us up to further security breaches with the subsequent chaos."

"Yet they must be calmed and reassured," Dumbledore observed. "We cannot do that with vague lies, not after everything that's happened. We have, I fear, reached the end of the line regarding the

people's willingness to blindly listen to the Order's directives," he analyzed.

"We can argue a leaflet drop, like the ones that the Muggles performed in World War II," Hermione proposed. "It would explain the leaflets."

"And the posters?" Flitwick asked immediately. "How do we explain how some of these leaflets attached themselves to walls?"

Shacklebolt grimaced. "Fear of the Muggles is bad enough. Collaborators? We'd have anarchy on our hands," he predicted.

"We can just tell the truth that we have a spy in our midst," McGonagall suggested, a little weakly for Ginny's tastes. "Maybe the community itself will resolve the problem."

"We'd be initiating a, pardon the pun, witch hunt," Ginny interrupted the discussion just then. "The community would turn on itself and we would inevitably have to intervene with spell fire, which is just what the Muggles want," she argued. "Once we fire a shot into a crowd, no matter the circumstances, the magical community will lose its faith in the Order, and turn to the next best security-provider: the Ministry, which happens to be under the thumb of the Death Eaters."

"Not all of it," Dumbledore protested. "We have our operatives in the Ministry, same as the Death Eaters, Miss Weasley," he reminded her.

Ginny stared down Dumbledore for a moment before scoffing softly. "Our agents are outnumbered in the Ministry and outranked by theirs. Only Scrimgeour is of high enough rank and with us, and that's not even a guarantee. Best case scenario, if we lose the people's trust? He'll launch a coup and regain his position on top of us."

"Surely the Minister wouldn't be so political at a time like this," McGonagall protested.

Ginny eyed the poor woman, a little sad that the brilliant witch had decayed to this state over the loss of her career and destruction of her achievements. "That's exactly what he'll do, and the Muggles are counting on it," she assured everyone present. The prim witch

twitched a bit, and Ginny's eye lingered on her for a moment—she seemed…familiar, somehow. Pushing the thought out of her mind, she returned to the issue at hand. "If we incite any sort of instability amongst ourselves, the Muggles will stand by while we destroy each other. Then, they just have to sweep in and assimilate what's left."

"So they're turning the Death Eaters' tactics on them," Dumbledore reasoned. "Voldemort and his followers won't just stand by and watch the Ministry collapse—not after all the work he's put into that plan. He'll try to reassert order just when the timing couldn't be worse."

"Exactly," Ginny confirmed, one eye still on the prim witch. For some reason, the woman's eyes really reminded her of someone, but she couldn't remember who.

"It's a smart move," Ron observed as he leaned forward on the table. "If we add up all the magic users in Britain, we've got a fair population going. If we started killing each other again, however, we would cut a huge swathe in that number. We'd be easy pickings then."

"In that case, how do we deal with the agent situation?" asked Hermione. "We can't initiate a hunt for them, or we'll look like we're desperate and losing control, but if we leave them be, we'll lose control of the population sooner rather than later."

Silence descended on the group then, as each member pondered the situation. Only the prim witch stayed silent, having not been dismissed yet. She seemed…anxious for orders, fidgeting every so often, though the others didn't seem to take notice of her. Only Ginny did, and she swore that the woman seemed familiar. Not facially, or even physically. Rather, it was that stare of hers. Like she'd seen that particular expression she'd briefly caught a glimpse of when the witch had looked at her. It nagged at her memory, but nothing concrete came up. Maybe she was just imagining it? Perhaps confusing her with some other past encounter?

Unknowing of the internal musings of the youngest Weasley, Dumbledore sighed loudly as no one spoke up at Hermione's question after a few minutes. "I think we've spoken on this long enough for today," he said wearily. "We're all undoubtedly tired after

a long day. Shall we dismiss and reconvene tomorrow?" he proposed.

A spatter of relieved agreements rose from the council members, who were all just glad the meeting was over for the day. A few were more relieved than others, given their respective workloads. Nonetheless, Ginny waited until the proceedings were wrapped up and Hermione got up from her chair, giving only a passing, wondering look at her brother as he passed by her, deliberately ignoring her apparently.

Once Hermione was ready to go, she accompanied the witch out of the office and down Dumbledore's staircase. It was then that she realized that she hadn't noticed the prim witch leave before all of them, having apparently slipped out just before they had dismissed themselves.

Looking towards her best friend, Ginny decided to bring the topic of the witch up. "Say, Hermione, have you ever met that witch who delivered the pamphlet before?" she asked bluntly.

Hermione's answer was rather quick. "I don't think so," the brunette admitted. "But then, I did hear that the administrative staff had hired a few more witches. Maybe she's one of them?" she suggested. "Why are you asking?" she asked curiously.

Ginny shrugged. "She seemed…familiar," she admitted without reservations. Hermione was her closest friend, after all, and the two witches had looked out for each other for years now. Who could she trust if not her sister in all but blood? "I just can't pin down from where…"

Hermione looked at her friend a little worriedly. "Familiar how? Good familiar, like from a pleasant memory? Or bad familiar?" she asked. "She's not someone from your pre-injury Auror days, is she?"

Ginny shook her head. "Like I said, she just seemed familiar," Ginny reassured her. "And I don't remember if it's pleasant or bad. Just…the look on her face when she saw me. A mixture of defiance and…resentment?" she trailed off, something about that word reminding her of something further.

Hadn't she met someone who'd looked at her like that before? Hadn't it been in…Spain, was it?

Wait a minute…Spain. She had been there to capture Potter, and succeeded only because the whole world knew of him then and the Prime Minister had been forced to incarcerate him. He'd looked at her rather viciously during their initial conversations.

No…it wasn't Potter. He wouldn't stoop to dressing like a girl. Or spying on others so dangerously.

Wait.

Like a girl?

Didn't Potter have a girl who followed him around?

Ginny stopped in her tracks, having missed anything Hermione had been talking to her about. It was only when Hermione spoke her name, worriedly, that Ginny snapped out of her musings, having finally reached the answer to the nagging question in her mind: who had that prim witch reminded her of?

Josefina.

Potter's follower.

A spy.

"Oh bloody hell," she swore.

Hogwarts, United Kingdom, September 15th, 2010 (D-Day +587)…

In the end, no sign could be found of the prim witch that had reported to the council that day. Literally not a single trace of her had been found, and that was what convinced Ginny that this was the work of Potter. It was too clean, too professional, and too directed at shaking up the leadership's psychological state not to be. The government itself needed no such tactics—with a single law, it could possibly wipe them all out. Potter, on the other hand, wanted them rattled, on the verge of panic; panic that he could then use to manipulate them into striking first and in so doing justify his own claim to power.

She couldn't allow that, of course, and thus tried to use Hermione as the voice of reason within the makeshift group.

It was a cunning strategy, one that kept him out of the limelight and thus out of public scrutiny. Yet, she knew that if she didn't manage to drag him onto the stage, he would get away with this, and more.

She was certain, certain that Josefina's presence as the spy had been deliberately planned by Potter himself. A message to those who knew of her, at least, that plainly said:

I am everywhere, and see everything. More importantly, you can't stop me.

It was galling of him, but Ginny knew his message was just as accurate. Until they found a way to accurately root out the identities of all his spies, Potter could infiltrate the Ministry of Magic and the Order of the Phoenix with impunity. More importantly, they needed to find out how he was gaining these spies. So far, there had been no sign of the Unforgivables being used, nor had anyone in sensitive areas tested positive for any sort of poison or potion that would explain hidden compulsions. That meant the spies were all such out of free will, probably, which meant in turn that they had no way of getting their identities unless they themselves got themselves caught or were sold out by a comrade.

At the moment, Ginny sincerely doubted either would happen.

Wandering idly around the town, she pondered on the problem silently. One way to potentially counter Potter's growing influence was to frame him and his Military Mages for some ghastly deed, but she doubted she could get that passed by the Order, or even Hermione for that matter; and if she couldn't convince her closest friend of it, what chance did she have of convincing total strangers?

Another way, she figured, was to rattle Potter himself. Maybe target his family, or any exes and current girlfriends. Hit him where he never expected anyone to reach. Again, though, there was the problem of getting such a plan through the Order. Being the Light-obsessed zealots they were, Ginny doubted she could get such a ruthless plan through the voting procedure.

Frustration crept up within her as she realized how utterly inhibited she was within the Order. She knew she'd lobbied to be allowed back, but she had never expected them to be so stubborn and unwilling to change. Even those who were willing to stand up to Dumbledore were too morally uptight to condone attacks on so-called "innocents."

It was maddening, really. No matter how many plans she thought up to counter Potter, no one was willing to listen. If she suggested a hit, it was decried as murder. If she suggested a kidnapping, it was shot down as monstrous.

Honestly, how was she supposed to help the Order counter a military threat when they refused to let her think and act along military lines? The way they were handicapping her, she might as well be fighting Potter's rising influence with a hard-boiled egg!

Silently raging as she was, she was thus ignorant of two people coming into her office on the castle's second floor until one of them coughed to get her attention. Snapping out of her reverie, she was immediately tempted to go for her wand and ask questions later, but relaxed upon realizing it was one of the few men she could trust with keeping her confidence without informing Dumbledore or anyone else on the Council—even Hermione.

"Who's your friend, Colin?" she asked curiously as she carefully inspected the almost drooling man beside her subordinate. He had a look of total wonder and joy about him that frankly unsettled her.

Colin rolled his eyes. "Not my friend," he replied tersely. "Found him scurrying in the back alleys; apparently, he's been living there practically from two days after the settlement was moved to the valley."

It was a testament to the bitterness that the Great Reveal had caused among many of the Muggleborn population that Colin Creevy, once a bright, excitable young man, had turned into a terse, bitter man who obeyed her orders without question and enforced her will wherever he could. It probably hadn't helped that his Muggle parents had been killed during an anti-mage riot.

Ginny eyed the ecstatic man still held onto by Colin. Was he one of those very spies Josefina's presence had gloated about? She discreetly grabbed her wand under the table and performed a magical reveal spell on him, only to be surprised when nothing came up.

Colin, however, wasn't fooled. "He's a Muggle, alright," he confirmed. "Checked him out myself when I realized he wasn't listed in the census," he added. "Not one of Potter's, either."

Ginny leaned her head into an open palm as she regarded the man. He was thin—sickly so; probably as a result of living in the back alleys all this time. His eyes, however, were lit with something akin to wondrous joy, as though he was exactly where he wanted to be. He wasn't armed, since Colin would've checked for that before bringing him here, so it didn't look like this was an assassination attempt.

"Who are you?" she settled for asking directly. No sense beating around the bush.

The man looked even more ecstatic than before, if that was possible. "G-George Ackerman, oh great, hallowed witch!" he presented himself in a simpering manner, falling to his knees and everything.

Ginny raised an eyebrow at the display and glanced at Colin, who shrugged. "He did the same to me when I questioned him," he confirmed.

Ginny returned her attention to George Ackerman and kept her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Tell me, George: why are you here in a magical town?" she asked. "You do know that Muggles are heavily discouraged from entering the town limits, no?" A pretty way to say they were outright forbidden and typically held back by force as a result of the mass riots outside the valley gates, but still valid.

Her observation did little to thwart the man's excitement, it seemed. If anything, he got even more riled up. "I couldn't help it, great witch!" he cried out. "I couldn't! Everyone with a brain knows you are the next step in our evolution!" he added fervently, a tinge of mania in his eyes. "You are the future! We are the past! Doesn't it make sense, then, that we normal people should work for those who will illuminate our path to a better future?"

Ginny glanced at Colin while the man spoke, noticing her subordinate's eyes roll as the obviously crazy man ranted on about how subservience to the empowered next step in human evolution was the logical choice. Clearly, this man was intellectually deficient, if he believed the Magical leadership anywhere had any intentions of leading their fellow men into a brighter future. If anything, it would revert to a society where normal folk would become second-class citizens, if not worse.

Still…

Ginny observed the man again. For all his craziness, he did seem genuinely willing to serve her, as though being her subordinate were the greatest gift anyone could give him. His vocabulary wasn't shoddy, either, meaning he had to have some form of education under his belt.

Given that all her avenues of attacking Potter were exhausted, why not look into this particular venue? He seemed willing, fanatically devoted, and honestly crazy enough to attempt to infiltrate the most powerful man in Europe's growing faction.

Perhaps this was the break she had long been waiting for?

She gave George Ackerman a glowing smile as she realized the countless opportunities he could bring her. The man, in turn, seemed euphoric at the gesture. Certainly, that tinge of mania in his eyes seemed more pronounced than ever.

"Are you alone in your beliefs, George?" she then asked kindly, eager to hear his response. As she'd hoped, he shook his head fervently, apparently so enraptured that he no longer could formulate words. "I want you to contact them, George; do you understand me?" she asked.

The man fervently nodded, while Colin gave his superior an cautious glance. What was she playing at?

Ginny, however, kept her focus on the simpering man. "Tell them to get in touch with Mr. Creevy here," she then added, motioning to Colin, who looked surprised. "Then come see me later; I may have a job for you."

The man was practically salivating from joy as he listened to the great mage bestow upon him the honor of carrying out a mission for her. How he'd longed for this day since the Great Reveal. How he'd ached to serve those obviously superior specimens of humanity!

Now he had his chance. Now he had one's attention. He would not fail.

"Yes, great witch," he said subserviently as he tried to kneel to Ginny, only to be held up by the scruff of his shirt by Colin.

"None of that," Colin groused, obviously unhappy with being the contact point for a group of crazies.

Ginny smiled at the display. "Dismissed."

Post-AN: And with this chapter, one now knows what happened to Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Ginny's also revealed to be alive, and problems with leadership are arising all over the Magical community. While I understand this chapter was too little focused on Harry's own development, I hope you all understand that knowing how the other side is operating can shed some light as to how Harry gets away with the things he does.

Till next time!

Marquis Black

Zaragoza, Spain, September 17th, 2010 (D-Day +589)…

"What is benevolence?"

Neville looked up from his hand-washing ritual to look at Harry's back in surprise. "What?" he asked, confused. The question had well and truly come out of the blue.

"What is benevolence?" Harry repeated, still staring at the smoking ruin that once was known as the city of Zaragoza. "What is that theory of being charitable and kind, as opposed to pragmatic and brutal?"

Neville stared at his superior's back blankly for a moment before shrugging and looking back down at the reddish water in the bucket he'd been using to clean his hands. "Beats me," he replied honestly, having no clue where Harry was going with this impromptu philosophical stint. "Sounds like a load of crap."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe it is," he allowed. "Maybe ruling in favour of benevolence is a fool's errand in times of chaos. But without benevolence, how does one get the people's loyalty?"

Neville was silent at this question, looking into the rippling, reddish water that had once been clear. Like much of his recent life, it was tainted now, perhaps irreparably so. "Having second thoughts?" he asked softly.

"If I am?"

Neville's gaze hardened as he redirected it back at Harry, who had now turned slightly to look down at his finest subordinate. It hadn't even been half a year since Neville had been sprung from a life sentence in Azkaban by Sirius Black and his cohorts, and already Neville was proving to be one of Harry's most devastating commanders.

"I would kill you," Neville replied bluntly and honestly, now getting back to his hand washing.

Harry chuckled. "So honest," he mused, amused.

"You rescued me from a life of dreariness and mediocrity, and for that I'm thankful," Neville countered simply, ignoring the fact that his wet hands were beginning to prune from the excess water exposure. "Your uncle saved me from Azkaban; I'm also thankful for that. Your goal saved me from living an aimless life, relegated to impotent obscurity; I am thankful for that, too."

In a flash, Neville was on his feet and had a handful of Harry's uniform in his grasp as he pulled up his commander close, until Neville's burning gaze was unmistakeable to Harry. Said raven-haired Military Mage was apparently unaffected by the stare.

"I'm thankful for all that, yeah," Neville reiterated. "But what we've done for all of that; what we've prepared ourselves to do to see that goal achieved…you can't just go and drop it all at a moment's notice," he stated fiercely. "If you do, I'll kill you."

Harry smiled easily, despite the fact that he would probably have a hard fight on his hands if Neville ever did in fact rebel against him. He smiled, however, because he knew that battle would not happen today—if ever.

Instead, he reached up with a gloved hand and clasped it on Neville's wrist. "Then you have nothing to worry about," he said simply. "I haven't forgotten, nor am I willing to forsake that path that I chose when I involved myself in this."

With that, he suddenly tightened his hold on Neville's wrist, causing the man's hand to jerk in surprise and let go of Harry's uniform; now it was Harry who was in control. Still, he dropped his grasp from his friend and turned back to observe the smouldering ruins of Zaragoza.

"Remember those feelings, Neville; they will guide you down the right path," he told to his subordinate, who was now rubbing his slightly aching wrist. "We have eliminated much of the resistance of Eastern Spain, and with this victory, we have done much to cripple their fighting spirit," he observed. "A little more, and we'll have broken this country to our will."

Neville glanced at his superior searchingly. "What do you have in mind?" he asked. Frankly, he would be glad to be off the front lines, even if he hadn't been on them for long. Nothing could have prepared him for the sheer destruction he had been expected to

bring upon his enemies. Even the most basic rookie of the Military Mages—those who would barely qualify as an Auror any other day—had exceeded Neville's own contributions for the first few days.

Harry was silent for a moment, as though weighing how deeply to bring in Neville in his confidence. Apparently, trusting the man won out. "Reconstruction," he said simply. "We have won the people's fear here, but not their love, or even respect. If left alone, they will eventually seek revenge on us for what has happened, and we must nip this problem in the bud."

"Your uncle agrees," came a voice behind Neville, causing the brown-haired man to turn suddenly, a spell already on his lips in the event that he had to vaporize someone on the spot. Thankfully, he didn't.

"Xeno," Harry greeted. "How was London?"

"Bad," Harry's all-but-in-name intelligence officer reported. "Riots every day. Every garden variety, too," Xenophilius added. "Anti-mage riots, anti-government riots, anti-war riots…every activist and his dog's come out of the woodwork to promote their agenda, it seems."

"So the news of the attacks' actual breadth have finally leaked out?" Neville asked.

"Just a bit of it," Xenophilius corrected him as he dropped his travelling bag on the ground and took a seat on a pile of rubble nearby. "Warwick's doing a splendid job of keeping most of the bad stuff under wraps, but the numbers, at least, have been released."

"Worried we'll lose control, Neville?" Harry asked calmly.

"Isn't it a legitimate concern to have?" Neville shot back. "If the government back home collapses, how are we supposed to keep our forces here?"

"It won't collapse," Xenophilius assured the younger man blandly. "Black's got the government covered. The only way for it to collapse now is if we let it."

"Of course, that's not all there is to it, is it, Master Lovegood?" asked Harry, chuckling.

Xenophilius switched his gaze from Neville to Harry, who'd turned slightly to face his subordinate. He had a sly smile on his face, too, which made Xenophilius think that perhaps Harry already knew what he was asking him to report about.

Eventually, he nodded. "Your higher ups are beginning to muscle out the civilian administration," he reported. "Black's reported that security is now entirely out of his hands, and there's talk about Education being reassigned to the military administrators, too."

"A coup?" Neville asked, surprised.

"A subtle one, if it is," Xenophilius commented with a grimace. "They haven't touched Warwick, though, and he hasn't mentioned getting approached by the military."

"Which means either they're taking it slow, or it's just some higher-up's move to stabilize the country," Harry concluded, bringing up his hand to cup his chin. "Interesting."

"Either is feasible," Xenophilius added. "We've got riots in the streets everywhere, and at the same time, the military is pretty much the only thing keeping the country on its two legs. Frankly, if they wanted to coup, there wouldn't be any sort of united front to stop them."

"Has force been used to put down the riots?" asked Harry then.

Xenophilius shrugged. "No more than usual; police batons and the like."

Harry nodded, still pensive. "I see…" he mused to himself softly. "A little soon, but not unexpected…What about the mages? What have they been doing?"

"Josefina reported in that your little shock tactic worked; Hogwarts is a mess right now," Xenophillius reported dutifully. "Started a veritable witch hunt, if you pardon the expression, for spies."

"And the Ministry?"

"Still infested with Death Eaters, I'm afraid," he replied, noticing Neville's dark look at the news. "Scrimgeour is on the verge of resigning, if my information's correct; looks like a Death Eater will be in the Minister's chair before long."

"Why don't they assassinate him?" asked Neville then. "Surely with his death, they could precipitate a regime change?"

"To what end?" asked Xenophilius in Harry's stead. "If power switches hands through murder, it's illegitimate, and what the Death Eaters want most right now is legitimacy. If they're seen by even just a fraction of the magical population as the legitimate government, then their power base increases several fold without the need for coercive force."

"Better the victory with as little used resources than the one that requires great manpower, Neville," Harry taught his number one subordinate. "Patience is what will win this war, not impetuousness," he lectured before raising a hand to stop Neville's comeback. "It's getting late. We've got to move out in the morning. Go train the troops for a while before turning in."

Deprived of his chance to speak out on the topic, Neville nonetheless nodded and saluted his superior before walking away, leaving Xenophilius with Harry, both of them observing the younger man walk away.

"He's impatient," Xenophilius observed. "Was it really wise to bring him into our forces so quickly?"

Harry gave his advisor a self-assured smile. "He's too rare a talent to discard, much less keep imprisoned," he assured the older wizard. "If Dumbledore or even Scrimgeour had known how to use him effectively, our rise to power would be threatened by his very presence each step of the way."

Xenophilius shrugged. "Luna was pretty fond of him, but I can't see what you see in him," he admitted, a hint of sadness tinting his voice as he mentioned his daughter.

Harry chuckled. "He's just a stone right now, Xeno, but even the dullest stone can be made into a jewel," he said. "This is just training.

When he comes into his own, I dare say even I would have trouble fighting him."

"Dumbledore and the Aurors seem to think less of him," Xenophilius pointed out. "What makes you think he's that good?"

"He's got the spark," Harry said simply with a knowing smile, crossing his arms as he leant back onto a ruined pillar "That drive to become the very best. It's rare among his peers to begin with, but it's shining bright in him."

Harry then fell silent as he readied himself mentally for the next step. "Xeno, how volatile would you say London is right now?" he asked calmly.

Xenophilius looked at him for a moment before responding. "Very. What I said may make things look better than they are, but the truth is, it's pretty damn bad up there," he admitted. "The Death Eaters are inciting mages to harass the normal population, and it's got them on edge."

Harry nodded. "Then it's time," he concluded. "Xeno, call Sirius. Tell him I need him to invite out Richard II's ghost for me."

London, United Kingdom, September 30th, 2010 (D-Day +602)…

When Sirius had received the order from Harry thirteen days ago, he had felt one of the most curious emotional experiences in his life. On one hand, he'd been relieved that the order had finally come, and on the other, he'd been terrified of what was about to happen. Add to that disapproval for the whole thing, as well as excitement, and it made for a really strange emotional cocktail.

Whether he had reservations about the plan or not was irrelevant, however. Harry was in charge of this dance, and Sirius was just one more puppet put in his place for a specific reason: to carry out Harry's agenda.

It wasn't a poor paying job, either; his lifestyle was, in a word, luxurious. With government stability all but dead, prices had hit rock bottom, while at the same time the international propaganda and unauthorized media blackout they kept up in place kept the currency strong enough that Sirius' generous government salary was enough

to make him a rich man, without even taking into account his family funds. It also helped that the Goblins helped by using their international contacts to maintain the illusion that the United Kingdom was still economically solvent.

Keeping the foreign companies from withdrawing their investments from the UK had been daunting, however. He wasn't proud to admit that more than once magic had been involved in keeping them in the country, even as society broke down further with every passing day. It wasn't ethical, but it was necessary. The country couldn't bear an economic crisis on top of concurrent political and social crises.

The result was that while it was business as usual with the economy, the cities of the UK were flooded with rioters who found a new reason to voice their discontent every day. That meant deployment of riot squads from the police force, but even these were getting taxed outside of their maximum capacity. That meant, in turn, that the military had been forced to start deploying troops for crowd control, which didn't go over well with the populace, just as Harry had predicted.

Thus, it was time to initiate the next phase of the plan, now that Spain was on the cusp of being won.

This next step had been carefully planned out. It had been long since established by Sirius, Harry, Xenophilius, and the rest of the advisory team that there was no way Harry would ever manage to grab power in his current circumstances. As a mage, even if a state-sanctioned one, he would be forever distrusted by his superiors and kept outside of any meaningful power structure. Even his command of the Military Mages was, in practice, just a step higher than being a grunt.

That meant it was necessary for the power structure keeping them submissive to undergo a crisis of its own—one that would afford an opportunity for Harry to seize power. Surprisingly enough, it hadn't been Harry who devised the perfect crisis for this, but rather William.

Using the Wars of the Roses as his backdrop, William explained that if the brass was given a situation where they could seize total control of the government, at least one of them would try, thus precipitating a constitutional crisis. In that event, it would be possible for a third

party—one ostensibly just trying to save the nation—to enter the arena and seize power outright.

The problem was, the situation called for chaos. Controllable chaos, yes, but chaos nonetheless, and that meant trusting the populace not to make things worse than already predicted. That was asking a lot right there. The slightest miscalculation could enact a country-wide civil war, rather than a quick, systemic coup.

The target? The Imperial State Crown.

Perhaps the greatest symbol of the British state, its loss would throw the government into confusion and panic, and the people into a rage. If one could couple this loss with its sudden find by some ambitious general, who perhaps would have a retainer on hand whispering the need for a change in monarch, then how convenient it would be that a war hero, returning to Britain from service abroad, would stand up against such a traitor and take it upon himself to purge the government of the disloyal and corrupt?

The problem was that Sirius didn't like this approach one bit. He would do it, of course, but he felt conflicted. He might've gotten into government to help Harry, but treason was treason, and it offended his sensibilities. He also didn't appreciate the risk they were taking in carrying out this plot; any number of things could go wrong, and then Harry would need every loyal man on board to fight for him if they were to survive the aftermath.

Of course, he had to be thankful that their faction would ostensibly have no links to the theft itself. He had contacts for that—contacts Harry and the rest had all agreed needed to be used to avoid the mages getting involved, lest they make things worse.

The door to his office opened then, snapping him out of his reverie. He frowned as he watched his contact, in his mailman uniform, walked in.

"What's the word, Mister White?" asked the man gruffly. No sense in beating the bush around these types; crooks had no need for fancy words, just a job description.

"The order's come in," Sirius stated simply. "Do it. Pin in on looters; there's enough of them to go around for it to be credible," he ordered as he signed the delivery form the man had handed to him for appearances' sake. The package itself was probably just a gift from another MP or something equally banal. "Remember, no framing mages, no unnecessary violence. Get in, break some things, knock out the guards, get the target, and get out."

The man nodded curtly at the order. "No selling it either, eh?" he asked half-jokingly.

"No," Sirius answered firmly. "Keep it findable. I don't want it showing up in some random collector's trophy case when we find it," he warned. "And believe me, we will."

The mailman nodded again, a little disappointed. "Fine," he agreed grudgingly. "Where do you want it found?"

"Doesn't matter," Sirius said dismissively. "Put it on some homeless person, if need be. No political figures, however; I don't need a political scandal."

"Time frame?" asked the man calmly, not bothering to nod at Sirius' instructions. Both men knew the job would be carried out—Sirius was far too powerful to cross or blackmail.

"Get it done by the fifteenth," Sirius replied. "If it takes longer than that, I'm cutting your payment by a tenth for every late day."

The mailman narrowed his eyes. "That wasn't part of the deal, Mister White," the man growled.

Sirius was unmoved by the man's show of passive aggression. Out of the two of them, it was the mailman who was in most danger of losing everything, and they both knew it; this was just a show of unnecessary and pointless bravado. "I'm making it part of the deal," he said tersely. "You are about to steal one of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom. I can't afford for that to take any longer than it should."

"What's stopping me from just telling the public of your part, then, Mister White?" threatened the mailman. Again, pointless threats; still,

a dance that had to be danced every so often to reassert one's dominance.

"Your family," Sirius panned calmly. "Which reminds me, how are your daughters—Felicia and Patricia, is it? I do hope they're feeling better after that flu outbreak at their school," he asked, no hint of danger or warning in his voice, just pure concern, as though he had a vested interest in their wellbeing. It was perhaps the most chilling thing the man had ever heard.

"Jus' fine," the mailman mumbled, obviously intimidated. "It'll be done, Mister White. Pleasure doing business with you," he added quickly before taking back the clipboard and hurrying out of the office.

Left alone, Sirius frowned as he leaned back into his amazingly comfortable chair and leaned his head on his fist. He didn't like the fact that he had to intimidate so many people into doing the job that he—or more accurately, Harry—needed done. Especially not when the intimidation called for threats to family. As a filially pious person, he expected Harry to understand not to mess with another's family—but, conversely, perhaps that was exactly what made Harry so aware of the potential fruits of using family as leverage.

How ironic!

Sagunto, Spain, October 5th, 2010 (D-Day +607)…

Today was a day of firsts, it seemed.

For the first time since the war had started, the British forces hadn't been automatically shunned since arriving at a city; on the contrary, they were welcomed into Sagunto as heroes, much to the suspicion and caution of the British troops, all of whom vividly remembered the guerrillas that plagued them throughout the war.

Regardless of the British forces' cool attitude towards the locals, however, they were welcomed happily into the town, even helped as the soldiers of the Second Army made camp on the outskirts. For the first time since the war had started, the British forces watched as locals raised a pre-fascist Spanish royalist flag instead of the fascist yoke and arrows.

It was just as well, really, as the British, once again on the move, needed a better supply route than trucking cross-country all the way from Santander, and Sagunto had a port to its name.

A port that now the Spanish wanted back, having realized how important it was to the British war effort.

"Five corps are coming this way?" asked one of the officers present at the meeting incredulously.

General Stevens, now in charge of the Second Army after the death of his predecessor, nodded gravely. "Our scouts report that the enemy's been advancing steadily from Valencia to our south and Castellón de la Plana to our north," he confirmed for his staff. "Unfortunately, our own forces are beneath their combat strength due to garrison duties along the supply route to Santander, which is why I've gathered you here. We need ideas to counter this surge, and we need them quickly."

"How long do we have before the enemy arrive?" asked another officer.

"Twenty hours before they're in position," reported Lieutenant General Speirs, one of the few men who'd seen combat since the initial relief action at Gibraltar and kept jumping the ranks as a result. "Albert Company from my 34th Regiment reports they're deliberately taking their time in getting here to make sure that all enemy units arrive simultaneously."

"They want to trap us here," realized another officer. "Have four corps cut off our northern and southern routes, and the last cut off our supply route," he reasoned. "Sir, we'd be under siege in a hardly defensible location."

"Our best bet's fortifying the castle hill, sir," observed another Lieutenant General. "We can bog them down in street warfare for a while and retreat up the hill once the city becomes untenable. Should buy enough time for reinforcements to arrive and relieve the situation."

"Fifth Army Headquarters in Madrid is the closest, but even if we sent a messenger there, they'd never get a force ready before a week, at least," Harry, who'd been quietly observing the proceedings

so far, piped up. "Not to mention the Spanish will have that chokehold they're preparing for us defended tightly, so it'd probably take them weeks to punch through. Add to that the fact that neither the First, Third, or Fourth Armies can help, and we're relying a bloody lot on the garrison Army," he pointed out.

"We'll have to hope for the best, I'm afraid," Stevens said gravely. "I'll have a messenger sent out to Madrid right away," he nodded to a nearby aide, who saluted back and ran off to carry out the order. "Meanwhile, we need to think how best to stave off the enemy for two weeks, at minimum."

"Can our supplies even last that long?" asked Speirs sceptically. "We'll have to start scouring the city supplies if not."

"We'll need an inventory done," Harry agreed. "We need to find out just how much ammunition we've hauled here—see how long it lasts," he added. "My mages can take care of bombing wards—should let us sleep with some peace of mind."

Stevens nodded, pleased. "Good, that ought to keep their artillery and air support at bay," he agreed. "What else can we do?"

"Sagunto is surrounded by elevated terrain, we'll need to scout it out for potential ambush spots so that our reinforcements aren't ambushed on their way here," opined Major General Sullivan. "Maybe even place a few of our own men there to give the Spanish hell."

"That's a suicide mission," Speirs protested. "If anything went wrong, there'd be no way for them to return to Sagunto. They'd have to trudge all the way back to Madrid through insecure, potentially hostile ground."

"There's also the problem of the castle's capacity," Harry pointed out. "We've got…what? Sixty thousand troops here?" he asked for verification.

"Just about," Stevens confirmed. The rest were either dead, wounded and at the military hospital in Santander, or on guard duty wherever the Fifth couldn't spare any men. "What's your point, White?"

"The castle can probably take, what? Ten thousand, if we cram them together?" Harry pointed out. "That leaves fifty thousand troops without permanent defensive positions, not to mention the civilian population, which counts at about sixty thousand as well."

"Either you've got an idea, White, or you're about to try to convince us to surrender," growled Sullivan.

Harry smiled emotionlessly at his counterpart. He liked Stevens, Speirs, and most of the rest of Stevens' staff, but not Sullivan—he seemed to hate the idea of Military Mages on a fundamental level. "My mages can expand the castle's capacity, but only within enclosed spaces, such as rooms, basements, and the like," he offered. "However, even then we'll be running out of space, so we're going to need a substantial detachment digging or building new rooms for my mages to be able to accommodate all of our capacity needs."

"Aren't we stretching the mages a little thin as it is?" asked Speirs, crossing his arms. "Bombing wards, covering for ambush detachments, fortifications within the city…and now magical expansion? Do you even have enough men for all that?"

Harry gave a confident smile at Stevens. "Believe me, sir, my men are up to it; they've learned a lot since Zaragoza," he assured his superior. Zaragoza hadn't been the mages' finest hour, but it had showcased their considerable battlefield abilities.

"I certainly hope so, White," Stevens said, still sombre. "We're going to be relying on them a lot this time around," he added before nodding to himself. "Very well; I think we've thought this through as much as we can. We have six divisions we can use to defend the city," he summarized as he now pointed to the map on the table in their midst. He tapped six positions on the map of the city. "We deploy defensive positions here, here, here, here, here, and here. Speirs, you command the northern front. Sullivan, if Michaels is back on his feet, he's to take the southern front; if not, you're in charge," he ordered. "I also want both of you to carry out an inventory of our available supplies within your divisions

Both addressed men saluted Stevens. "Yes, sir!" they chorused.

Stevens then looked at Harry. "White, take your mages and fortify our location. I want the castle prepped to accommodate all of our troop capacity, plus civilians as well," he continued. "Also, have one of your men accompany the scouting detail to the hills around our position, just in case."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir!" he acknowledged.

"I'll be taking care of the centre of our defensive perimeter personally," Stevens informed them. "Let's get to it, then, gentlemen."

So dismissed, the General's staff began to filter out of the room inside the mayoral offices of the town, where they had set up headquarters. That would have to move, too—probably up to the relative safety of the castle.

Outside of the building, Harry was just readjusting his peaked cap, complete with Military Mage insignia on the front, when he noticed Xenophilius waiting for him. Not bothering to let the man know he had been noticed, Harry walked down the stairs and began to walk past him when Xenophilius came to his side automatically, quickly falling into step to his rear left.

"We're on warding duty," Harry told his subordinate simply. "Take…Stevenson, Abbott, Williams, York, Howe, and Bernstein and set up anti-bombing wards," he ordered as they both stopped near a crossroads. Harry pulled out a cigarette then and lit up, enjoying the brief feeling the nicotine surge in his system before continuing. "Also, tell Neville to get his kit together—he's going to be leading a patrol to the nearby hills."

Xenophilius nodded. "Anything else?" he asked the younger man, committing every order to memory.

Harry nodded, thankful for the reminder. "Pick out our twenty of our best technical mages and get them to move to the castle up the hill," Harry said. "They're going to need to expand several of the castle's enclosed rooms. General Stevens should have an overseer there that'll explain more in detail."

"I'll see to it that everything's carried out," Xeno assured him. "What'll you be doing?"

Harry smiled back at him. "I'll be around."

Knowing he'd get no other answer from his superior, Xeno merely stared at him for a brief moment before nodding and silently Disapparating, off to carry out his orders. Left alone, Harry finished his cigarette before flicking it onto the ground and looking up to the sky. Bright blue—what a rarity at this time of the year.

At the sound of footsteps approaching, Harry tucked his hands in his pockets and smiled to himself. "Done already with your work, Speirs?" he asked wryly. "Your efficiency is something to admire."

"Cut the crap, White…or should I call you Potter?" asked Speirs, his frown deepening as he approach his colleague. They'd known each other since Gibraltar, so that counted for something.

"Call me White—keeps things simple," Harry suggested.

Speirs nodded noncommittally. "Fine, White," he agreed. He paused then for a moment before walking up to Harry's side and staring out down the street—empty, but for a few soldiers here and there on patrol. A city under siege could truly resemble a ghost town when so close to the battle lines.

"Let's be frank," Speirs said then suddenly. "Stevens is good man, but he's too timid. He listens to advice, but has no ideas of his own, and he distrusts the mages," he said calmly. "If I fell in battle, Sullivan would be in charge."

"Sullivan is too reckless, and under his command the Second Army would be destroyed," Harry concurred just as calmly, a satisfied smile on his face. He'd been wanting Speirs on his side for a while now, but the man's typical aloofness and neutrality in the whole mage debate had made him practically unapproachable.

"You Military Mages have proven to be loyal to the state," Speirs added next. "Distrusting you any further is counterproductive towards the state's efforts at stability."

Both men turned towards each other then, an unspoken agreement between the two being formed. "What are you thinking, Speirs?" Harry asked then, already knowing what his colleague was hinting at.

"Stevens and Sullivan are liabilities to the war effort," Speirs said bluntly, not one to beat around the bush any further than was necessary. "You're a good strategist and a capable commander. The Liverpudlians in the army follow you without question, and I know you've got support back home and in the brass," he informed the younger man. "During the battle, should anything happen to Sullivan and Stevens, I will follow your orders without question, too."

It was a surprising statement from a man who technically outranked him, but Harry couldn't have been gladder for it. Speirs commanded enormous respect amongst the rank and file for having been a battlefield commander throughout the entire war, even if his rank excused him from actual field appearances. With Speirs on his side now, he had just gained twenty thousand soldiers. "I'll keep that in mind," he replied with a conspiring smile.

Speirs stared at him for a long time then, seemingly trying to force himself to read Harry's unspoken intentions. He probably had a good idea of where Harry's ambitions would lead, but for some reason, he seemed resigned to accept that as inescapable fact, and chose to side with him. After a moment of silent staring, Speirs nodded at him once more and left, leaving Harry alone once again.

Harry smiled at the blue sky above. A good portent indeed.

Harry tugged on his gloves then, making sure they were tightly fastened to his hands. Now, to cement his place in history.

Sagunto, Spain, October 6th, 2010 (D-Day +608)…

In a siege, the first indication you get that you're under attack typically comes in the form of something exploding.

So it was that, in the early morning of October 6th, the first of the British forces' defensive positions were jolted into action as an artillery shell exploded against the wards that Harry's mages had put up.

The British troops were, naturally, of high morale and spirit, given their astounding successes in the war against Spain, and yet even then they were surprised at the mass of Spanish troops forming up just outside of bullet range. Certainly, they had been briefed that the

enemy forces outnumbered their own considerably, but even with that warning, the British soldiers couldn't help but be shaken by the vast array of enemies readying to storm their comparably pitiful defensive positions.

The problem with wards, to compound the issue, was that as they kept things out of their perimeter, so too did they keep these same things inside, meaning that a bombing ward would just as easily render their own artillery pieces ineffective, and that the Military Mages were forced to withdraw until such a time when the enemy troops penetrated the ward's defensive perimeters.

Which served Harry just fine.

Watching the action a from a few blocks away via binoculars, he calmly observed as the improvised defence works blocking the streets became a hive of activity as the British defenders rushed to get their final preparations in order. He watched as a two-man HMG team readied their weapon, the loader handling the ammunition belt like gold, while the gunner stared down his iron sights, his left hand briefly leaving the gun grip to quickly cross himself, no doubt asking for divine protection in this hour of need.

He watched as, further down the road, mortar teams readied their tubes, with the radiomen squatting by, no doubt waiting for coordinates to relay to their charges.

Fifteen. Fifteen different defence checkpoints had been set up between the city centre and the enemy coming at his flank. To reach Harry, however, the enemy needed only to cross three. To get to the castle hill, thirty. To the castle proper—fifty.

Watching through his binoculars, Harry had no doubt that the large enemy host would reach the very walls of the castle. Even with his mages fighting, the enemy had effectively trapped them in Sagunto, victims of their commanding general's lack of foresight.

Still, Harry had a plan. And that plan would bring immeasurable rewards—if it succeeded.

"Enemy troops converging just outside of firing range, sir," the radio operator informed him, relaying the front lines' reports, no doubt.

"Captain Hollenbeck reports that enemy vanguard consists of about five thousand troops."

Harry nodded. "Stick to the plan—hold position until deemed untenable," he ordered the radioman to relay. "On my signal, have the mortar teams fire their ordinance at the predetermined targets."

Harry didn't even hear the radioman acknowledge his order, instead refocusing his binoculars to the hill on the other side of the fields bordering Sagunto. Neville and his team were still there, and judging by the utter lack of interest the enemy army was showing towards those hills, they hadn't yet been found—or if they had, then they weren't being considered much of a threat.

Or rather, that was the superficial reasoning one could draw. Instead, Harry expected that the Spanish commander knew full well just who it was that occupied Sagunto. Moreover, Harry could guess who it was that led the Spanish forces—General Alejandro Ruiz-Perez, the man who'd been the bane of the British Second Army during the entirety of the war.

An honourable, if devious and intelligent man, he'd been at the forefront of every difficult battle the British had to fight every step of the war. When the invasion had first started, he'd been in charge of the North-Eastern Army of Spain, hindering the Second Army's otherwise inexorable march. When he was finally transferred away towards the west to counter the First and Third Armies, the Second had finally been able to subjugate the Spanish North-East.

It seemed ridiculous—even fictional that a single man could pose so much trouble, but that was the truth. Amongst the British, General Ruiz-Perez was nicknamed "The Wall" for his amazing defensive leadership skill. If he wasn't such a big headache for him, Harry would've loved to have such a man on his staff. As it was, Harry had no doubt the man would only ever surrender if he died.

A pity.

The radio crackled again then, this time buzzing alive with the sound of stressed soldiers.

"CONTACT FIRST POSITION!" a soldier could be heard screaming through the radio. So, the enemy had finally crossed through the

wards. They were more determined than he'd expected—this was certainly not what he'd come to expect from the Spanish commander. "We're being suppressed! Enemy is moving up without adequate resistance!"

He raised his binoculars again and aimed them towards the first position of his flank. As the radioman had yelled through the apparatus, Harry could see the street asphalt burst here and there where the bullets hit, victims of bad aiming. More importantly, however, were the British soldiers practically huddled against the barricade, only the HMG teams firing their guns, relatively safe behind the makeshift steel bullet screens they'd built around their gun emplacements.

"First position is in danger of being overrun," one of Harry's aides, a remarkable non-mage by the name of Albert Clarke, noted as he, too, watched the situation develop via his own binoculars. "Shall we advise General Stevens to have the mortars fire, sir?"

Harry stayed silent, still watching the advancing Spanish troops move in on the first barricade. They were being careful, advancing only along the sides of the street and using the outlying buildings as cover. A mortar strike would only do minimal damage at this point. He needed them towards the centre of the road before such a strike could be called in.

He toyed with the idea of having the mortars fire rounds on the buildings the Spanish forces were using as cover, but dismissed it almost as quickly. Forcing them into the centre via such a tactic would probably fall within the Spanish commander's expectations.

Harry had another idea then. Lowering the binoculars, he turned his head towards his aide. "Call up Lovegood. Tell him to have two Blasting Mages report here immediately."

"Yes, sir!" the radioman acknowledged before changing frequencies. "Shield-One, Shield-One, this is Sword-Three; Hellfire requests Triad to send over two—say again, two Bravo-Mikes!"

"Sir, won't General Stevens object?" asked Clarke. "The Mages are supposed to be stationed at the castle," he reminded his superior.

"General Stevens is being influenced by dubious judgment from short-sighted officers, Major," he informed his subordinate. "General Speirs will support my action, in any case."

Silence permeated the forward command post for a few seconds before the radio crackled back to life. "Sword-Three, Shield-One. Roger; Triad is sending over requested Bravo-Mikes. Out."

Almost immediately thereafter, two soft pops alerted the people inside the forward base to the arrival of two mages. Without turning to meet them, Harry knew the two had saluted him and smiled to himself. "Report," he said calmly.

"Sir! Codenames Earthshaker and Meteor, reporting for duty!" a rough sounding male voice spoke up behind him. Impressive codenames, to be sure—typically a good sign. Military Mage codenames were given on the basis of their magical strength, hence Harry's own ominous nickname. To have Meteor and Earthshaker as one's codenames indicated quite a bit of power.

"The first forward position is on the verge of being overrun," Harry informed the two mages who stood stonily at attention, their impeccable blue-and-white trimmed uniforms the very picture of perfection. "The enemy is making it worse by being clever about their approach, minimizing their own casualties at our expense."

He raised a hand to point towards two spots along the sides of the road towards the forward position. "I need you two to force the enemy troops to move along the centre—our designated killing ground. Do it quickly, before General Stevens realizes we've deployed mages to the battlefield," he ordered. He watched passively as both mages thumped their chests in salute before disappearing as softly as they'd appeared.

It didn't take long after that before the first results of his ploy began to emerge. Loud explosions shook the area around the first defensive position as massive explosions on both sides of the road startled the attackers towards the centre of the road, where the British HMG positions finally had a clear shot at them, cutting the advancing wave of troops to ribbons.

"Looks like it worked, sir," Clarke noted phlegmatically, tacitly admitting he'd been perhaps wrong in questioning his superior's tactical decision.

Harry smiled. "Indeed, Major," he said modestly before snapping his fingers towards the radioman. "Get me Meteor and Earthshaker on the radio, Corporal," he ordered.

"Sir!" came the acknowledging grunt before Harry felt a metallic object being placed in his outstretched hand. Pulling it up to his mouth, his binoculars held up with one hand, Harry turned his attention to his two mages on the field.

"Meteor, Earthshaker, this is Sword-Three; good job on completing your mission," he praised them—it never hurt to let the troops know you cherished their accomplishments. "I need a repeat performance along the eastern and western approaches of this sector. Looks like the Dons are looking to avoid whatever artillery we seem to have aimed at your location."

He heard a few chuckles over the radio, glad to see that the anti-magic shielding was holding for the radios—well, actually, it was just EMP shielding, but it seemed to be holding for the most part. Mind you, a concentrated burst of magic would burn the shielded equipment without much trouble. Still, it was nice to see that the radios would survive Apparation, at least.

"Eartshaker copies," the reply eventually came. "Meteor copies," the female, Irish lilt followed.

In short order, Harry watched as four more massive detonations occurred at the western and eastern flanks of Stevens' defensive locations, and the subsequent, nightmarish mix of gunfire and screaming informed Harry that the plan had worked as Spanish troops funnelled towards the centre of the approaches, right into the iron sights of the British defenders.

"Enemy troops have moved into optimum barrage position," Clarke reported dutifully. "Shall we advise General Stevens?" he asked.

Harry was silent for a few moments. "Corporal, sitrep on the Spanish advance in the other sectors," he ordered, apparently ignoring his subordinate's question.

"Yes, sir," the man replied before chattering away at the radio. "Sword-One, Sword-One; this is Sword-Three, please advise on hostile advance in your sector, over."

"Sword-Three, we are currently holding all positions," came the disembodied, mechanical response. "Casualties light, over."

The radioman glanced at Harry for a second before nodding to himself. "Copy that, Sword-One. Sword-Two?" he followed up.

"Sword-Three, we are holding position, but are coming under heavy attack!" came the expected report from Sword-Two. "Casualties are mounting, and Major General Sullivan has been forced to take to the front to calm morale!"

The radioman again glanced at Harry before giving his response. "Copy that, Sword-Two; Sword-Three—out."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest then, his head tilted up thoughtfully as he thought out the situation. That Sullivan was under heavy pressure was no surprise—the man, while a good commander, was fitter for attacking positions than defending them, due to his impetuous nature. He wouldn't accept the help of Harry's mages, either, probably suspecting them of being loyal only to Harry, and not the state—something which, truth be told, he wasn't wrong about. Still, it meant a flank would possibly fold under the superior numbers of the Spanish ahead of schedule, and he couldn't allow that.

The time had come, then. If Stevens and Sullivan were taken out of action, Harry could swiftly take over early on, assuring that the morale drop wouldn't come at a critical juncture later on.

"Major Clarke," he said suddenly. "Please inform Lovegood that we are initiating Contingency Omega," he ordered. As the people around him sucked in air in shocked understanding, Harry felt reassured that the secret plan hadn't been leaked. No one outside the small circle of officers and auxiliaries he'd organized would know about the plan, and all of them were either here with him or up with Xenophilius, whose loyalty to him was beyond question.

Still, it was a testament to his men's stalwart loyalty to him that none of them hesitated in carrying out their assigned task, even as they knew what the end result would be. Harry felt a surge of smug pride at realizing that, pleased that his efforts at cultivating his men's loyalty had been successful both among the mages and non-mages.

"Triad reports that Agents One and Two are moving into position now, sir," the radioman informed him stoically, obviously not pleased with the plan, but still going ahead with orders.

He wasn't the only one, Harry could see. Clarke was visibly holding himself back from saying something, but rather than rebuke him for it, Harry decided to let him vent out his thoughts—hidden thoughts tended to fester and foment doubt.

"Speak your mind, Major," Harry ordered his subordinate, who hesitated for a moment before nodding.

"Sir, couldn't we just wound the General and arrest Major General Sullivan?" he asked. "Why kill them?"

"Woundings and arrests lead to scrutiny, Major," Harry informed his subordinate. "That means everyone in this room and in on the plan will be investigated, thereby bringing with it the danger that we will be found out. This must be done for the greater good," he said firmly.

"Shadow-One in position," a female voice sounded through the radio then. Good—his agent nearest to Stevens was in place. That assassin he'd had to pick personally—if he'd picked at random, there was always a chance that the shooter would have second thoughts. He needed someone absolutely devoted to him to pull that trigger to avoid any such complications. Sullivan, for his part, had numerous enemies within the Regiment, so finding his assassin hadn't been all that hard. "Target acquired. Need confirmation."

"Shadow-Two in position," he heard a male voice through the radio then. "I have a shot."

"All assets in place, sir," the radioman reported. "They're just waiting for your order."

Harry nodded. This was it, the moment when he'd finally come into his own as a military power within the British system. "Do it," he ordered, his voice as unfaltering as his resolve.

The radioman, for his part, was more reticent in so casually relaying the assassination order. "…All agents, plan is a go," he said eventually into his mouthpiece. "Say again, plan is a go. Take the shots."

"Copy." "Roger."

The room waited for a moment while the radios went dead. Another radio-op had his frequency set to the general British channel, thereby hoping to intercept any alarming notices. They didn't have to wait long.

"Jesus Christ!" the room heard someone shout through the British channel. "Those bastards got Sullivan! I say again, Major General Sullivan is down!"

"Sword-Two, this is General Speirs, can you confirm that General Sullivan is KIA?"

"Sword-One, we have a confirmed KIA notice on General Sullivan!"

"Christ," Harry heard Speirs swear. "Sword-Three, this is General Speirs; I need General Stevens on the line—"

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY," another voice interrupted Speirs mid-request. Throughout the entire brouhaha, the room was utterly silent as they listened to the situation spiral out of control. It wasn't time just yet for Harry to step in, but it was almost at hand. "General Stevens is down! I say again, Stevens is down! The forward positions are folding!"

"This is Shadow group—targets eliminated; returning to base," they heard the two agents report mid-crisis via the private channel one of the radios were tuned to.

"All forces, stand your ground!" Speirs could be heard berating the panicked operators, obviously quick on the uptake despite the frustrated edge to his voice. "Keep combat discipline, damnit all! We

are not beaten, and we will not retreat unless according to plan! I say again: hold your ground!"

The radio kept going on with excited chatter, but what drew Harry's attention was the sudden upward snap of a third radio-op's head. The man's eyes narrowed for a moment before nodding seriously to himself. "Yes, sir," he spoke to whomever was on the other side of the call. The man turned to face Harry. "Sir, General Speirs on the line—he wants a word," he reported dutifully.

Harry tuned in his handheld radio to the appropriate frequency and pushed the talk button. "White here," he said laconically.

"It's done, then?" asked Speirs.

Harry smiled to himself. So Speirs really was on board. Here he was worried he'd have to dispatch another Shadow agent to take care of him. "It's done," he confirmed.

There was a pause in the transmission then before Speirs spoke again. "Very well. Your orders?"

Harry's smile turned to a triumphant smirk. He had this in the bag. Now his rise to power would be unstoppable. "Follow the plan," he ordered. "Lure the enemy into the city. Triad has our welcoming mat ready to be rolled out."

There was radio silence for a moment again before Speirs spoke up again. "Very well. It will be done. Speirs out."

Harry lowered the radio with a satisfied smile. Everything was going according to plan so far, with a few minor hiccups here and there. He looked at his staff and tossed the handheld radio to one of the radio-ops, who caught it handily.

"Gentlemen, time to pack up. Our work is done here," he informed everyone. "Set up at the base camp."

When the staff evacuated the room, Harry was the last to go, smiling to himself the whole way out, pleased at how well everything had gone. Once out of the building they'd requisitioned, with a little resistance from the former tenants of the apartment in question—one of whom's dead body Harry had to be careful not to trip over—

he carefully arranged his expression to show grim-faced seriousness as befitting a military commander who'd just heard that two superior officers had been killed in action.

Two pops nearby told him his deployed mages had returned then.

"The building is secure," Harry told them. "Destroy it."

Meteor and Earthshaker both bowed to him as he passed by them. "As you wish, sir," they rendered dutiful obedience before walking towards the next target of their destructive magic.

As Harry walked away, he closed his eyes as he savoured the sound of the building collapsing behind him.

Sagunto, Spain, October 10th, 2010 (D-Day +612)…

The siege, for all intents and purposes, had gone badly for the British defenders. The Spanish numbers had ensured that they would push the British out of their trenches and further into the town, with each defensive position eventually overrun as the anti-artillery wards began to fail due to continuous barrage from the enemy. It was just a matter of time, then, before the British were in a full rout to the castle, where the mages' magical touches had ensured that they would all fit and that the walls would stand up to the abuse they were about to be inflicted on. Nonetheless, the cost had been high; hundreds, if not thousands of British soldiers lay dead in the streets of Sagunto.

The castle hill itself was now completely surrounded by the enemy, and while the defenders could breath easy knowing that there was only one real, feasible way to mount an attack on their defences, it didn't mean that they could afford to be complacent. It was made worse with the fact that eventually, the artillery ward surrounding the city had gone down, leaving the hill briefly exposed before another ward, this time protecting only the castle hill, had been slammed into being after the mages were immediately deployed to contain the situation. Even so, the mages responsible for the wards were being forced to continuously channel magic into the ward, given the constant barrage of artillery and mortar fire that hammered it. Unfortunately, not all of them could take the stress, and at least ten mages died as they poured everything they had into the wards.

Even worse was the fact that, cunningly, the Spanish commander had waited to take the battle to the castle long enough for the civilians to evacuate into the castle as well, leaving the defenders' supplies in a precarious position, dwindling down quickly as the soldiers were forced to share their rations with the refugees they were protecting.

In the midst of all this chaos, with the Spanish now battering at the castle walls relentlessly, the British defenders nonetheless managed to keep their discipline—perhaps teetering on the edge overall, but still holding for now. This was more a mark of their desperation, however, than their belief of victory. They were cut off and reinforcements before they were eventually overrun seemed unlikely, causing each British soldier to fight like a desperate, cornered animal. The results were telling: for each British soldier that died, nearly ten Spaniards lay dead on the ground.

"INCOMING!"

Xenophilius ran along the ancient castle's parapets, ducking his head as bullets flew overhead, each of them threatening to end his life in an instant if he wasn't careful. No amount of magic could fix a hole in the head, after all, and any he put up now would fall almost immediately, considering the amount of firepower being levelled at the castle. He heard a few screams coming from the courtyard then, preceded by a loud explosion that signalled a mortar hit. The wards were beginning to fail, then. That was bad news.

He slid to a stop then, briefly glancing over the bullet-riddled parapets to see the Spanish insisting on their assault on the castle. While they could've waited for the defenders to starve, Xenophilius guessed the commander wanted to be sure that the castle—and more importantly, the mages within—were all dead before the British could send reinforcements to relieve the siege. Nevermind that the casualty rate was horrific.

He brought up his wand and took careful aim at a knot of Spaniards seemingly protecting something with their bodies as they advanced. Another siege ladder, no doubt. They'd already tried setting a few up along the walls, and succeeded in a couple of attempts, but the defenders had always managed to destroy them in time, thus preventing the castle from getting overrun.

"Confringo!" he hissed, watching with satisfaction as the ground beneath the knot of enemy soldiers exploded violently, effectively decimating the ladder they had indeed been carrying towards his section of the wall. He heard quite a few soldiers near him give triumphant whoops as they watched the covert attempt foiled and smiled. That ought to put a dent on the attack, even if for just a few minutes.

Satisfied he'd contributed in some small part to this particular wall section's defence, Xenophilius scrambled back up to his feet and continued his run down the wall, still looking for Harry. While he'd no doubt prevented a potential gap in their defences from forming, Xenophilius had no doubts that the Spanish wouldn't let up, and the problem with that was that the defenders were figuratively almost at the end of their rope.

That the wall section had been defended from that particular assault did not mean that Xenophilius didn't have to keep his head ducked as he scrambled along the parapets, the Spaniards' attempts at breaching the castle becoming more determined and ingenious as time passed. At one point, they began stacking stones at the bottom of a wall, knowing that it short of exposing oneself, it would be hard to dismantle the makeshift siege ladder. That particular attempt was only foiled when the British lobbed a multitude of timed explosives over the walls towards the foot of the pile of rocks and blasted it away, causing some damage to their own walls in the process.

Xenophilius craned his head around, looking for Harry, when he caught sight of a couple of sections of British soldiers buckling under the pressure of assaulting Spanish besiegers, one of the ladders apparently having managed to get set up. Already, numerous British bodies littered the parapet floors, their Kevlar vests finally having run their course in defending their wearers from death.

He had to think things through only a moment before making his decision. While he did need to inform Harry of the desperation of their situation and convince him to initiate the second part of their plan, leaving a potential gap to open up in their defences was a worse choice. Wand out, he dashed towards the defenders, who were only holding on thanks to the encouragement of their comrades-in-arms along the sides of the breach who were in turn firing on the advancing Spanish troops.

Picking up speed, the elder mage jumped onto a battlement, onto another, and then jumped over the knot of embattled British soldiers near the ladder, his wand pointed at the Spanish climbing the ladder.

"Out," he ordered them mid-air, jabbing his wand at them, just before another blasting curse shot out of his wand. The spell impacted the middle of the ladder just as he landed on one of the battlements, stepping onto another, and then jumping back behind their protection, just as the astonished Spaniards at the foot of the ladder opened fire on him again. The ladder, naturally, exploded with over twenty Spaniards still on it, flinging them in every direction.

The couple who actually managed to hang onto the wall were quickly dispatched by a lone British soldier, who gleefully shot the men who'd come so near to killing him, only to suddenly fall backwards as one of the advancing Spanish party shot him immediately thereafter, taking full advantage of the man's sudden appearance from cover.

Xenophilius grimaced, but put aside his feelings at the man's death. The man had taken an unnecessary risk and paid for it. Instead, he turned to the other defenders and nodded at them.

"You all good?" he asked them over the din of gunfire and explosions. At the collective nods and thanks, he smiled and gave them an encouraging thumbs-up. "Make them bleed for every inch they try to take!"

The sections of British defenders gave a small cheer as they watched Xenophilius dash away again, a little more inspired in their defence than they'd been when they were on the verge of being overrun. Xenophilius, for his part, kept looking for Harry on the parapets, but couldn't manage to find him. Giving up on finding him on the walls, he descended the stairs, taking great care to avoid the shimmers of disillusioning spells, and went into the castle proper, seeking out the war room that Speirs and Harry had commandeered.

Indeed, he found both men hunched over a map of the castle and its immediate surroundings, while another, larger map hung from a wall, denoting the city and its surroundings. Both maps had an incredible amount of markings written on them, while the radio operators and computer technicians were working feverishly to stay on top of the battle information and transmissions.

Speirs was talking when Xenophilius entered the room, pointed towards the northern approach of the city.

"…doesn't make sense," he was telling Harry. "Why mobilize so much of the Spanish capital's defensive force to take out a fragment of our forces, especially with the First and Third Armies moving in on Barcelona?" he pointed out. "The smart thing would've been to entrench them around Barcelona and have the First and Third pay for every square inch of ground."

Harry leaned onto the table, his eyes scanning the maps. He had an idea as to why this siege had come about—which had admittedly bugged him since he'd heard of their advance from Barcelona. He only then noticed Xenophilius standing at the door frame, looking winded. "Xeno," he greeted noncommittally.

Xenophilius took in a deep breath to steady his heartbeats and saluted both men. "Defences are starting to buckle," he reported. "We've managed to push back the Spanish, but we're at the end of our rope here," he added. "We need to launch step two of the plan; please give the order!"

Harry and Speirs exchanged looks before Harry shook his head. "Not yet," he replied firmly. "We're still waiting on a signal."

Xenophilius goggled at the two men. "Signal? What signal?" he asked, confused and not a little outraged. He'd been fighting for the past four days alongside the common soldiers and he was starting to feel the brunt of exhaustion, both physical and mental.

Harry smiled, even as the roof shook from an impact blast and rained down dust and grit. "Our ace in the hole."

Outskirts of Sagunto, Spain, October 10th, 2010 (D-Day +612)...

"Shhhh," Neville hissed to his team as they hid behind foliage, the Spanish patrol soon passing near them. He waited until the enemy had passed by before waving for his two assigned squads to move up towards his position.

Putting up a concealment charm—which wouldn't really hold up to a thorough inspection, but would probably be enough to keep any further patrols out of their way—Neville motioned for one of the soldiers to unfurl the map she'd kept in her pack.

"It's official," he summed up grimly. "Sagunto is completely surrounded."

"Sir, what about the enemy convoy we spotted coming from the north?" asked one of the NCOs. "Command has to hear about it."

Neville glanced at the radio operator, who shook his head. "Comm lines are still down, sir. Anything trying to send a signal in or out of Sagunto just gets feedback," he reported.

Neville grimaced at their bad fortune. The way things were, there was absolutely no way to get back within Sagunto to report back to Harry and his superiors. The stranglehold the Spanish had enacted around the city essentially made any attempts to sneak in impossible, and there was no way they could strike at some weak point in the Spanish formation—it was simply too good, and Neville didn't have a fraction of the men he needed to pull off such a gambit.

"Sir, Sagunto's going to fall if something miraculous doesn't happen soon," one of the sergeants pointed out unnecessarily. "And it doesn't look like Madrid is going to be able to send reinforcements in time."

That was another complication. After the ring around Sagunto had been formed, the Spanish had detached a significant amount of troops to blockade the roads from Madrid, meaning that any hopes of getting reinforcements to the besieged forces in Sagunto quickly had been dashed. Even if they did manage to defeat the blockading forces, the battle would probably take too long, and the defenders would probably have been defeated by then.

"A surgical strike at the Spanish general could do the trick," one of the sergeants suggested, although his tone of voice suggested in turn that he wasn't quite convinced of the plan's feasibility.

"Too many troops between us and him," Neville dismissed immediately.

"Should we go back to Madrid then?" asked a Corporal. "I mean, we can't get in, they can't get out, the supply routes are all cut off, and we're too undermanned to hurt the bastards. What's left?"

Neville gazed at the map on the ground, observing every written annotation and symbol on it, and slowly began to form an idea—a crazy, absolutely bonkers idea, but an idea nonetheless.

"The convoy," he said, first to himself, then to the group of NCOs by him. "We strike at the convoy," he repeated himself. As he expected, sceptical looks welcomed his idea.

"Look, we've got two choices at this point. Do what Corporal Brenner says and go back to Madrid and let the Second Army bite the dust, or we hit the Spanish hard and hope to high heaven that it rattles them enough to break their formation," he pointed out, a little heat entering his voice. "I don't know about any of you, but I'm damn tired of watching them batter away at our friends in Sagunto, and I'm not one to sit around doing nothing. Even if that convoy's full of hay, it'll still get their attention, and maybe give our lads a fighting chance—especially if the Spanish think that it's the work of reinforcements."

The NCOs looked amongst themselves as Neville spoke, doubt still clouding their faces. The truth was, none of them enjoyed watching the Spanish crawl ever deeper into the city, and they'd all felt helpless when they realized that their comrades had been forced into the castle at the top of the hill, where they were no doubt making a last stand. The problem was, the convoy they'd observed, albeit briefly, was both large in number and undoubtedly armed. Against their three sections, 24 men in all, what hope did they have of success?

Yet, as Neville had pointed out, that was the only choice apart from retreat, and all of those who'd accompanied the Military Mage on the scouting mission were members of the legendary Francis White's 75h Regiment, the Liverpudlians. All of them knew and had seen Francis White, known as Harry Potter, defend the lives of their fellow soldiers on the battlefield. To leave him to die in Sagunto, where he was fighting to protect their comrades, then, felt like the worst kind of betrayal one could perform.

Still, this wasn't the type of mission you could just assume everyone would volunteer for. Or even would agree to go on.

"Volunteers, then," summed up the senior sergeant, a little resignedly.

Everyone in the circle nodded their heads and crept back towards the small resting grove where the soldiers had been left to take a breather. As they were fairly hidden away from the Spanish patrol routes, they didn't have to worry about standing or speaking normally.

The senior sergeant, not wanting to risk the volunteer numbers to be affected by dislike or hero-worship over mages, stepped up to his men and fixed them all with a hard stare.

"Bad news all around," he told them, noting grimly that this had their complete attention. "Sagunto's completely cut off, meaning there's no way for us to get in there to help out, nor is there a way for them to fight their way out," he informed them bluntly. "Reinforcements will never make it in time either, thanks to the Dons' deployment we all saw three hours ago," he added for good measure. "That leaves us with two choices: retreat back to Madrid and hope the boys in Sagunto can hold out long enough…" he let that idea fester for a moment before continuing with a savage grin, "…or we bring the fight to the Dons anyway in the hopes that it'll scare them so hard they'll be changing their trousers every second of every day they think of the British goddamned army from now to the day they die!"

The enthusiastic cheers from the soldiers were commendable, but also a security liability, so the sergeant quickly waved them back down to silence. "That's the spirits, boys," he praised them. "Now, we've got a plan. It's a stupid plan, but a plan nonetheless," he informed them. "A convoy will be passing by Sagunto in four hours, at which point it will be impossible to get to it due to the enemy camp being so full of Dons the very air smells like sausage and booze," he briefed them. "The plan's simple: ambush the sodding bull-humpers and raise some hell so the Dons in Sagunto get all confused!"

His savage grin then decayed into a grim, vaguely displeased grimace, as if the next part hurt him just saying it. "Unfortunately, it won't be easy, and it's not a mission we're likely to all come back from. That convoy's probably got reinforcements in it and adequate escort, so the operation is pretty much a one-way trip, lads," he told them frankly—maybe a bit too frankly for Neville's tastes, but he

knew he had to keep himself separate from the proceedings, lest his status as a mage colour the end result.

"So we need volunteers," the sergeant concluded. "Who here's willing to go spit in the Dons' faces?"

Neville watched patiently as the soldiers in the three sections he'd brought with him debated amongst themselves for a moment before the first of them rose to his feet, followed by another, and then another, and so forth. By the time they were done, Neville was pleased to see that all of them had risen from their places, all of them volunteers for the mission. He knew this wasn't always the case, of course; some people just weren't ready to risk their lives this readily.

"We'll need someone to get to command anyway," Neville reminded the sergeant in a whisper as he leaned in. "In case we fail."

The sergeant nodded. "Right then; Hawthorne, Beckett, you two are to get to command in Madrid and report to Army HQ what we've found," he ordered arbitrarily, thereby removing from the soldier pool the two youngest soldiers. Might as well use that energy to move quicker towards HQ, he figured. "The rest of you, gather your kits and get ready to move out in five. We've got a lot of terrain to cover, and not a lot of time to do it."

With that said, the sergeant dismissed the troops while the assigned two soldiers went with their sergeant to gather the accumulated intelligence for their trip. Their radio signals wouldn't reach as far as Madrid, and with the transmission jamming equipment the Spanish seemed to have, it was likely they'd have to report in person.

Meanwhile, Neville took a place by the senior sergeant and tucked in his hands into his blue greatcoat. "We'll stick out like a sore thumb if we move on foot," he noted.

The sergeant nodded. "Think you can turn the uniforms into something Spanish with that magic of yours?" he asked.

Neville shrugged. "I could, but the enchantment will fade away before we manage to get to the convoy," he warned. "Better to get the real thing—no time limit, and stands up to inspection."

The sergeant grimaced. "But there's no way to get them without killing the guys in them," he pointed out. "Bloody uniforms are just as bad as fake ones."

Neville grinned. "Don't you worry about that," he assured the man as he drew out his hands and made gripping motions, cracking sounds ringing from the move. "I've got this."

"Que haces, Juan?"

The Spanish soldier who'd turned to look around frowned as he continued to examine the forest around his patrol. "Juraría haber escuchado algo," he replied, still straining his ears to pick up on any errant sounds. Behind him, his patrol squad laughed amongst themselves.

"Probablemente un ciervo," his colleague suggested wryly, laughing then when a rabbit darted from one bush to another. "Ves?"

The soldier named Juan looked at the bushes where the rabbit had emerged from nervously, still uncertain whether it'd been his imagination or not that he'd seen a flash of blue and the sound of footsteps amongst the foliage. Was he really being paranoid? He couldn't help it, in a way—this entire war was driving him out of his mind. First, they're winning, then when the British strike back, they bring along some sort of superweapon that obliterates their defences, only to find out that said weapon is a person—a human being like himself, only possessing of powers far beyond the scope of a normal human being's.

He'd known quite a few of soldiers outside his own regiment, and within the year, most of them had been killed, almost all of them through engagements with the Second Army, with whom the monster in question—a man they initially only knew as El Demonio, and later as Harry Potter, known also as Francis White—had been stationed. Given that Sagunto was supposedly garrisoned by said army, Juan felt he was well within his rights in feeling absolutely terrified.

Still, he was holding up the patrol at the moment, and none of his squad mates seemed particularly worried. Maybe he was being a bit too jumpy? Shrugging, he turned away from the bushes he'd been so keenly observing and began to walk back to his squad, his fellow

soldiers still throwing the occasional jeer at him for his apparent cowardliness.

Hearing Sergio call him a wuss was the last thing Juan ever heard.

The patrol was stunned to see a flash of green light enveloped their comrade briefly before dissipating, causing the man to drop to the ground, dead before he hit it. Behind him, his hands locked before him in a pushing fashion, was a man wearing a blue greatcoat over an all-blue uniform which the Spanish had long since been trained to recognize due to its first wearer's fearsome reputation.

Military Mage.

Instantly, the patrol leapt into action by bringing up their weapons and firing at the mage, but were just as quickly foiled as a slab of tightly packed earth shot up in front of the mage, no doubt product of the man's magical ability. The patrol began reaching for their grenades when they heard the earth rumble around them for a moment before slabs of earth began to rise around them.

Panic quickly overtook deadly intent as they realized the slabs were bending and converging over them, making a couple of them dash for the slabs to avoid getting trapped in an earthen dome. Unfortunately, their intent had been foreseen by the mage, and as a result, earthen spikes shot out within the dome—only long enough to detract further charging towards them. The spikes worked, as the Spaniards all huddled together at the centre of the dome, which was now reaching its final completion as the light of day began to dim, and finally disappear before their eyes.

Hopefully one of the other patrols would have heard the gunfire and come to rescue them. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to happen, as this patrol was already the third one attacked.

Outside the dome, Neville observed his handiwork passionlessly. He hadn't liked using the Killing Curse, as it both used a lot of magic and also seemed to have severe physiological consequences for the user, but it had been necessary to eliminate the one soldier who'd been outside of his dome range. This next part was simple, however.

Walking forward towards the dome, he could faintly hear the sounds of angry, defiant shouting within the earthen structure, but as this

was practically routine for him, Neville dismissed the shouting and placed a gloved hand on the dome, harnessing his magical power for the next step.

Closing his eyes, Neville allowed the magic to flow through his hand and into the dome, no longer needing to visibly know that flowers and grass were beginning to sprout from the structure. He continued pouring magic into the dome even so, until every inch of its outer shell was covered with vegetation, and the shouting inside became even more intensive and tinged with panic. Good, they were beginning to understand their predicament.

Despite the fact that he heard them shout surrenders at him, Neville kept going with his spell, knowing that any enemy troops left alive could ruin his detachment's mission. Soon, flowers began to bloom within the dome; flowers that, despite their beautiful appearance, had nothing beautiful about the effects of their pollen.

He now heard dulled gunfire inside the dome, probably an attempt to break out of the dome, but Neville knew that was useless. The earth would just regenerate itself with the abundance of magic he was pouring into it. Even if it didn't, the time they needed to carve a way out through gunfire would take more ammo than they had, or even just time.

He felt a tingle in his hand then, telling him that it was time. He drew back his hand, just as the shouting devolved into outright panicked screaming, and waited for ten minutes. On the dot, Neville looked up from his watch and snapped his finger at the dome, which crumbled into dust that the wind blew away. Left in its wake was a circular pattern track where the grass seemed to have simply disappeared, and eleven more bodies, untouched and unspoiled but for the terrified, panicked expressions they held at the moment of death.

"Wingardum Leviosa," he intoned as he motioned towards the twelve bodies in total. The corpses began to float in the air, limp, and Neville observed his handiwork with some satisfaction. Not a single trace of violence on them or their uniforms.

Silently, Neville walked away from the scene, the corpses floating behind him as though led by a tether.

Just like that, the forest returned to its eerie quiet.

Getting to the hill they needed to get to was a lot harder than most people would think, given the flat terrain and general lack of Spanish troops in the track of land separating both geographical features. One would assume that, now that they were all dressed in Spanish combat fatigues, that they could just march their way unimpeded, but that wasn't the case.

First of all, they were thirty-seven in total, which meant that if they all wanted to get to the ambush spot at the same time to be ready for the convoy, they needed to keep a unanimously quick pace for quite a few kilometres. Beyond that, there were several checkpoints along the way—mostly to regulate traffic between the besieging army and the blockading forces.

Finally there was the language barrier.

In a country they were warring against, the British had lamentably few Spanish-speaking soldiers within their ranks, and those few who did know tended to hide this knowledge from their fellows for obvious reasons.

Fortunately, Neville had no time to deal with such petty reasoning, so the moment he found out that one of the privates, John Carver, was in fact Juan Carver, son of a British man and Hispanic woman, he'd put his linguistic skills to good use when the patrols began to get called by their central command.

It also helped now, when they'd been forced to commandeer a few trucks to drive to their destination.

Neville and the rest of the sections waited patiently as Carver and three others—essentially a fireteam, walked up to the two soldiers guarding the cargo trucks at the gas station that doubled as a checkpoint. Through amazing luck, the vehicle depot lay behind the actual checkpoint, and so they were cleanly in the checkpoint sentries' blind spot.

The hidden troops watched patiently as Carver began making friendly chat with the two sentries, who both seemed momentarily confused due to the fact that they'd never seen him before, though they seemed to shrug off the unfamiliarity and soon got into a casual

chat with Carver, not even noticing that the other three in his fireteam were unusually silent.

After a few minutes of chit-chat, however, the fireteam moved into position behind the sentries, acting as though they were observing the truck that the two sentries had been standing next to. In a flash after that, everything was over, as two of the fireteam drew combat knives and, clamping one mouth over their respective targets' mouths, stabbed deeply into the sentries' kidneys, slashing the renal artery in the process. Not content with just a single strike, however, the two assassins went for multiple stabs until they were certain the wound was irrevocably fatal. Only after they felt their victims go limp did they then put the two on the ground and wipe the blood off their knives before sheathing them.

Carver then appeared to say something to the lookout of the fireteam, who replied with a thumbs-up as he glanced around the edge of the truck. Carver reached into his fatigues and pulled out his communication mirror, aligning it just right to for Neville to see the flash.

"Area secure," Neville mumbled to himself, with the senior Sergeant nodding beside him as they crouched in the foliage. "Move out," he ordered almost automatically, despite the fact that as a Military Mage, even though he was technically a Lieutenant, he was still outside the Sergeant's command hierarchy.

Thankfully, it seemed the Sergeant wasn't about to quibble over authority, and acknowledged the order with a simple, "Sir," before ducking back towards the rest of the sections who were waiting. Within moments, the remainder of the makeshift platoon, all 23 of them, were waiting for the order.

"Let's go," Neville hissed as he moved out of the foliage and led the contingent towards the trucks at a trot, the whole operation necessitating a bit of speed. By the time they reached Carver and his team, two members of his fireteam were already dragging the bodies away into a nearby tool shed, while Carver and the lookout remained.

"Report," Neville ordered immediately.

Carver glanced at the lookout, who spoke up for the two of them. "It's going to be tricky, sir," the lookout reported. "We might be out of sight, but we're definitely not out of hearing range. The moment we turn on these babies, they'll be all over us."

Carver nodded, agreeing with this teammate's assessment. "That's not all," he added. "Even if they don't manage to nab us, the noise and the trucks' disappearance will be enough to get them on the radio to alert the rest of the Dons."

Neville shut his eyes tightly as he felt a migraine start to form. "Then we have to clear out the checkpoint," he concluded.

The sergeant, however, disagreed. "And what about any other patrols that have to come through here?" he challenged. "If the checkpoint guards are all dead or missing, it's a fair bet they'll alert their headquarters too, sir."

Neville swore under his breath. He hadn't thought of that. Thank goodness for NCOs, he supposed. "Then we have to sabotage that radio without making it look like sabotage," he suggested then, giving silent thanks when he saw the troopers and the sergeant nod their heads. "Any suggestions?"

Carver and the lookout glanced at each other for a moment while the sergeant sighed, apparently in exasperation. "Sir," the sergeant began, looking at him askance. "Are you or are you not a mage?"

Neville blinked once before smacking his forehead lightly. How stupid was he? Magic would do the trick with even the simplest spell! "Right, forget I said anything," he quickly said. "Any idea where their radio is?"

Carver nodded. "I asked the sentries when we got here; told them I needed to report back to basecamp," he said, his English only slightly accented by the Spanish he'd spoken a few minutes ago. Clearly, Carver had worked hard to hide it prior to his outing as a Spanish-speaker. "It's in the convenience store by the fuelling stations."

Neville nodded at the soldier. "Excellent," he praised before looking to the sergeant. "Get these trucks ready to go," he ordered. "This ought to take just a few seconds."

The sergeant nodded. "Already got the lads loading up," he reported. "One section per truck. Lance Corporals at the back, Corporals at the passenger's seat up front. Got a private driving each one of them," he added before looking at Carver and the lookout. "Carver, Edmondson, your section is in truck two."

"Sir!"

Neville saluted back at the two privates as they acknowledged their orders and then went for their assigned truck, leaving Neville with the sergeant. "Okay, here's the plan," Neville told him. "I'll set up a ward around the building, which they'll be able to see pretty damn easily. However, the moment that's up, their communications will be fried, at which point we need to be gunning out of here ASAP," he informed his second in command. "Think you can get the trucks running by then?"

The Sergeant grinned. "Absolutely," he confirmed.

Neville nodded back at the man as he turned to get the drivers to do their jobs. Meanwhile, Neville used the cover of the numerous trucks in the carpool—as there were many more than his detachment needed—to move as close as he could to the gas station shop, making sure he couldn't be seen by any sentries or off-duty soldiers. Previously, it wouldn't really have mattered, as he would have had Carver around to provide some excuse. This time, however, he wouldn't have any chance to cover his ass through Carver, and if, when he started doing the warding magic, someone managed to see him, they'd immediately recognize him as a British Military Mage.

As he ducked behind one truck after another, he mentally judged the distance to the shop. Once he reached the last truck before the shop, he calculated he was about fifteen meters away from it. Close enough.

Leaning against the side of the truck, Neville took a few calming breaths before closing his eyes and curling his fingers into fists. Focusing his mind as Harry had taught him, he let the magic flow through his body and into his hands, which began to glow green with barely suppressed power. He had to act quickly now. Suppressed magic was one of the easiest ways to harm oneself, as the raw

power, desperate for release, would start attacking its container until let out.

In this case, his hands.

He counted down from three as he tried to muster the courage to step out into the open and cast a very visible and very obvious spell that would no doubt immediately attract unwanted attention of the lethal kind. Just as he counted two, he wondered what was taking the Sergeant so long in starting the trucks. At one, he heard their engines roar to life, and a couple of surprised shouts from the checkpoint told him the Spanish had heard too.

Zero. Cursing to himself, Neville stepped out from the protection of the truck, his hands alit with magical energy, and raised them towards the building, just as the people inside seemed to realize that something was wrong in the car pool. He saw a grizzled soldier notice him almost right away and raise his hand to point him out, and yet the man was too late.

Mumbling the incantation, Neville felt the magical energy leave his hands as it shot towards the building, the spell already forming as it raced towards its destination. He didn't bother to stay and watch as it actually formed, however. The moment the spell left his hands, he was already turning to run towards the stolen trucks.

Gunfire erupted then, coming entirely from behind him. The Spanish had obviously reacted quickly and were beginning to pursue him, or the trucks. Either way, Neville picked up his pace and sprinted towards his detachment, feeling relieved when he saw that two of them were already beginning to roll out while the third was waiting for him. Out of the back, he could see the sergeant calling out to him to run faster. Behind the man, soldiers raised their assault rifles and fired at the unseen pursuers behind him that he was sure were trying to kill him.

It wasn't like the movies (one of which he'd had the pleasure of seeing at a military camp once) at all, really. There was no slow motion, nor was he about to miss the truck by a second. Instead, he managed to run normally towards the truck, get lifted into the back by a corporal and another helpful private, and helped lift the back flap as they rolled away from the parking lot, stray bullets from their on-foot Spanish pursuers peppering his truck.

Getting an idea, Neville focused his magic in his hands and clapped, the magic racing into the ground underneath the first truck. A second later, earthen spikes shot up under each remaining vehicle in the motor pool. None of them, unlike what the movies loved to show, exploded, which sort of disappointed him. Nonetheless, his people were now on their way to pull off an insane stunt, and he had to focus.

Getting up from the floor, he walked over to the front most of the cargo area and sat next to the small window that separated the rear from the driver's cabin and knocked on it. A second later, it slid open, revealing the Sergeant's face.

"Glad to see you made it, sir," the Sergeant greeted him with a wry grin. "I suppose that bloody racket when we left was your doing?"

Neville nodded. "I daresay the Dons won't be following us any time soon," he noted sardonically. "Status on the other trucks?"

"They've slowed down to flanking positions on either side, and we sustained no casualties during the raid," the sergeant reported. "We're making great time, otherwise," he added. "We should be in position in about two hours, so get comfortable."

Neville nodded and sat back against the railing, emulating his fellow soldiers, who were all, understandably, quite exhausted after five days of non-stop backpacking across a large hill infested with enemy troops. Thankfully, they'd managed to scrounge up some ammunition at the checkpoint—most of it pre-stashed in the cargo trucks for rapid deployment, no doubt—so they wouldn't be hitting the convoy with stones and bad attitude.

He just hoped they got there in time. From the veritable columns of black smoke rising from Sagunto, it looked like the city wouldn't last much longer.

"HARRY! WE'RE LOSING IT!"

Harry discharged his sidearm into a climbing Spanish soldier's face just as he heard Xenophilius shout at him the alarming message. Four hours had passed since he'd assured Xenophilius that everything would be alright—and that observation was quickly

becoming harder to repeat, as the Spanish redoubled their efforts to breach the magically defended castle, and the British survivors fought tooth and nail to keep them at bay.

Already, small gaps in their defences—caused by either gunfire or explosives, or a mixture of both—were quickly getting plugged in by Spanish troops managing to finally breach the parapet defences. Their numbers were minimal, of course, but for every Don who went over the wall, another British trooper died needlessly.

Over the radio, he could hear similar panicked reports coming from all over, all of them essentially summarized by Speirs' private transmission to his frequency moments later.

"White, we can't hold out much longer," the heroic general told him firmly, even as Harry ended another Spaniard's life with a blasting spell to the chest. "I recommend we activate our contingency plan right now, or else we're done for the moment the Dons hit ground."

Harry cursed to himself. He knew Speirs was right, and that Xenophilius' panic was well-earned. He'd put off the plan as long as he could, truthfully, because he expected another pawn in his grand scheme to act first, thereby confusing the enemy. No such luck, so far, even though he knew Neville would manage to survive cut off from the main army.

Nothing for it, then.

"Speirs, give the order," he ordered over his earpiece. "Gloves are coming off, ladies and gentlemen," he then transmitted to the other Military Mages, many of whom were still waiting for deployment orders within the fort itself. "Engage at will."

He pulled on his gloves then, making sure they were tightly on, observing the puzzled expression on the enemy soldier's face as another one tried to climb over the wall. The expression lasted for a second before it was burned to charcoal, courtesy of a finger snap from Harry in his direction. Casting a strong anti-ballistic shield before him, Harry stepped onto the battlements, the siege ladder which the Spanish had been using to get over the wall in the space between his legs, and raised his hands to his sides.

For a moment, he took the chance to admire the gory scenery before him. The entire fortress hill seemed to be crawling with Spanish troopers filtering in from the city. Within the city itself, many more could be seemed marching through the streets confidently, assured that the British artillery had been destroyed. Harry wondered where the Spanish commander would be amongst the organized chaos in the city. Would he be at the front-most building, to have easier access to his troops? Or perhaps at the very back, surrounded by the reserves to prevent any magical attempts on his life?

None of that mattered anymore. The Spanish were about to overrun the fortress, and Harry had no choice but to accelerate his plan. He merely needed a thought for the magical energy to course through his being, accumulating at his hands. A year and a half ago, a single Fiendfyre spell would've knocked him on his ass, exhausting as that spell was to cast wandlessly.

He had grown since then.

"Incendium Malus," he incanted, his hands suddenly bursting into flames as he brought them up to bear on the enemy troops, who froze at the sight of it.

Stories had long been circulating amongst the Spanish troops of the Briton who'd unleashed the very fires of hell on the beachhead at Rupuente. They had spoken of a titanic snake made of fire who gobbled up and ran through all the Spanish defences within seconds, burning everyone and everything in its path to ashes.

Within seconds, over two hundred Spanish troops died in the birthing burst of twin, titanic fire snakes. The two fiery vessels of Harry's wrath had been born from the two sparks his snapping fingers had caused, the spark consuming the immediate air around it and fuelling its own creation, until they became the monstrous snakes that had ravaged Rupuente a year and a half ago.

Panic gripped the magic-less Spanish forces then as they immediately recognized the beast and ran for their lives. Unfortunately for them, Harry had counted on this. He tapped his earpiece.

"This is Hellfire to all units; Caduceus has been delivered. Proceed with step two," he ordered via wireless.

"Sir!" he heard the cacophony of acknowledgements through his earpiece.

Within moments, he saw what seemed to be a ring of explosions rip through the city of Sagunto, cutting off the bulk of the Spanish forces which had been attacking the fortress hill from their reinforcements. When the dust cleared, a fifteen foot deep, twenty feet wide trench came into sight, the work of Harry's explosive-specialized Military Mages, such as Earthshaker and Meteor.

"Report," Harry ordered immediately, ignoring the relieved shouts of celebration from the British defenders all throughout the fortress parapets.

"Sir! Trench complete! We lost Quake and Meteor while withdrawing, sir!" the familiar voice of Earthshaker informed him, a tinge of grieving anger in his rough voice.

Harry swore. Meteor had been a powerful mage, and Earthshaker's partner. This wasn't the time for grieving, however. "Copy that. Initiate step three," he ordered. "Fire Mages, deploy."

"Sir!"

Moments later, he spied a large group of mages start to deploy along the parapets, all of them wearing the blue uniform that set them apart from the rest of the armed forces. These were, for lack of a better explanation, Harry's apprentices. More accurately, these men and women were those who followed in Harry's footsteps as fire-based mages who, while capable of other spells, excelled—and perhaps even revelled—in pyrotechnics.

The Spanish, for their part, seemed to recognize that something absolutely catastrophic was heading their way, and what level of panic they had already been at seemed to double within seconds as they started rushing the fortress and firing desperately, hoping to take down some of the mages before they managed to fire their deadly spells.

No such luck. With a flick of his wrists, Harry sent his two Fiendfyre serpents onto the advancing enemy, incinerating them in moments. Moving his fingers, he directed the serpents to cut a large swathe in the enemy troops, soon joined in by a multitude of other fire-based spells, such as your average fireball or even the dreaded Firestorm spell, which one of his mages seemed capable enough to direct towards the enemy.

The screams were horrible—they always were—and yet Harry refused to stop and react to the utter monstrosity that he was unleashing on the enemy. He had to do this. He had to show them that he wasn't kidding around; that if they cornered him, the gloves came off. Most importantly, however, he wanted to cultivate their fear.

Fear drove armies to panic, and that meant the loss of any gains their discipline might have afforded them. It made them make mistakes, which he could use to exterminate all opposition. That was why he baited the Order, why he cultivated his fearsome reputation before the Spaniards.

It was only then that he heard an unexpected explosion ring out from afar. His attention momentarily diverted—causing the flame serpents to writhe, as though they were trying to break free from his control—he glanced over towards the northern approach of the city, and was surprised to see black smoke rising from the distance.

It took him a few moments to realize what was probably going on, and then his expression turned gleeful. Clenching his fists before him, the snakes writhed in their death throes before collapsing into themselves. If his guess was right, then it was time for step four.

Hopping down from the battlements, Harry tapped his earpiece. "This is Hellfire. Begin step four; all batteries, open fire on marked locations," he ordered.

Almost immediately, the few mages in the castle courtyard began running to and fro, incanting cancelling spells every few meters. Gradually, the concealment spells faded away, revealing at least thirty 25-pounder Howitzers aimed up at the sky, each piece fixed into the ground with trail pits to ensure maximum elevation. Their barrels had all been cranked up as high as possible to ensure that

the shells wouldn't go too far, and each had been fixed with dial sight adaptors.

"Battery, report!" Harry ordered gruffly.

Speirs answered him, having left the security of the fortress to stand with the artillerymen. "Still getting into position, White," came the curt response. "Battery will be ready in two minutes."

Harry nodded to himself. "Copy that," he acknowledged before switching channels. "Fire Mages, increase rate of fire. Blasting Mages, provide support. Wards, report."

"Fire Mages acknowledge."

"Blasting Mages acknowledge."

"Wards reporting; Sir, we've lost Jackson, and Kilburn has collapsed. Anti-ballistic shield is holding, but barely. Another two rounds of artillery, and we're done," he heard a woman report.

Harry grimaced. The anti-ballistic shield was the only real thing preventing the Spanish from using air-based vehicles and general artillery to wipe them out. If it fell, the Spanish could withdraw and bomb them from afar at their leisure.

"Copy that," he replied, keeping his voice sounding confident. "Give it all you've got, soldiers; we're nearly there."

"Wards copy, Hellfire. Over and out."

Harry wished he could help the warders' plight, but sadly he had no talent for wards. Neville, in fact, was better suited for the task than he was, and the man was, if Harry was correct, pulling off an insanely brave and suicidal stunt to get the Spanish to back off.

That meant that Neville needed time.

Good thing for Harry that he was an expert in buying people time on the battlefield.

Harry climbed back onto the battlements, his ballistic shield holding back the pot-shots the fleeing Spaniards kept firing at the fortress, and lit his hands with magical energy.

"Incendium Malus."

Thirty Minutes Ago…

The ride to the ambush spot had been dull, all things considered. Despite having raided a military checkpoint and gotten away with three trucks, it seemed that the attempt at disrupting communications had succeeded well beyond what they had expected. Nearly an hour and a half had passed since they'd left the checkpoint, and not even a helicopter had flown by to intercept the miniature convoy as they raced towards the ambush spot.

Not that any of the soldiers were complaining—any time that the enemy was loathe to track them down and shoot at them was a welcome one. Nonetheless, it was making them slightly edgy, as this meant that for the past hour and a half, they'd been doing exactly nothing except checking their weapons, exchanging small talk amongst each other, and letting the dread towards the incoming mission wash over them.

Leaning against the driver cabin, Neville waited a few minutes before knocking idly on the window at the back of the cabin. Immediately, the glass slid sideways and the Sergeant peeked out. "Sir?" he asked.

"What's our status?" asked Neville.

"Five minutes out, sir," the Sergeant replied. "All troops report combat readiness," he added.

Neville nodded. "The convoy?" he asked next.

"Carver's been listening in on the radio chatter—looks like they're on schedule," the Sergeant replied. "We're ahead of them by about half an hour."

Neville was silent for a moment. "Half an hour's not that long," he noted grimly.

The Sergeant nodded out of sight. "Won't be much time to get to cover, that's for sure."

Neville thought about that. Sure, the original plan had called for the troops to take cover amidst the tree line on the hill next to the road, but what if he took out that option? What if, instead, he provided them with the necessary cover?

…sure, it was crazy, but who dares wins, right?

"Change of plans, Sergeant, gun the truck right for the convoy," Neville ordered the man, who sputtered in surprise.

"Excuse me, sir?" the man choked out. "Did I hear you right? You want us to charge the convoy?"

"Damn right I do," Neville replied, noting that the other soldiers in the back with him were openly goggling at him in horrified surprise. "Half an hour's too little time to get us all in position, and the cover's minimal, at best. So, new plan: I make the cover, and those bastards don't see this ambush coming from the front."

There was silence for a moment while the Sergeant pondered the idea, though the soldiers were noticeably less restrained in their vocal horror. After a moment of incomprehensible shouting, the Sergeant shut the dissenters up with a short but powerful, "SHUT UP!"

And they did—probably as a result of indoctrinated training to keep quiet when ordered. Whatever it was, Neville was glad for it.

"A charging ambush, is it?" the Sergeant mused. "…I suppose it is crazy enough to work. Alright; Private, gun the damn accelerator and aim right for the middle of the convoy!" he barked at the driver.

"The middle?" asked Neville.

"Causes more chaos," the sergeant explained. "If we hit the front, they'll just use the reserves from the middle and back to push against our lesser numbers till we break," he added. "But if we hit their middle, they'll be screaming bloody murder and wetting their pants before they realize they've got us outnumbered ten to one."

Neville wasn't so sure, but he decided to defer to the sergeant's veteran status.

The ride to the convoy was noticeably much more tense than the previous legs of the journey had been, given that the soldiers were now aware that they would be charging headfirst against superior numbers, with only the element of surprise and sheer ballsiness on their side.

As they neared the convoy, however, Neville heard the sergeant swear quite colourfully and loudly. Instantly, he tapped the window and it slid open. "Report," he ordered.

"It's not a supply convoy," was the sergeant's brief summary.

Neville raised his eyebrows in surprise. "It's not?" he asked, confused. "Reinforcements?" he asked.

"Better," the sergeant replied, the sound of something hitting the dashboard. "It's a civilian convoy. A special kind of civvie convoy."

Neville heard the driver start shouting joyful obscenities then, and the radio seemed to come alive with such chatter. Neville started to have an idea as to why, but he wanted confirmation before he got his hopes up.

"What kind?"

"The prime ministerial kind."

Neville felt his hopes soar. This was it—the way of turning Sagunto around, and perhaps even end the war in one blow.

"Sergeant," he spoke up, "Charge them down."

"With pleasure, sir," the sergeant replied, a hint of the man's feral joy lacing his tone. "Private, your heard the man—hit the gas and ram this truck down their fucking throats!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

The results of Neville's charge were…predictable, to say the least.

The three army trucks, barrelling at full speed towards the middle of the armed civilian convoy, took the travelling convoy entirely by surprise, crashing into them at full speed and forcing a few of their own army trucks into a road ditch on the other side of the road. It probably helped that Neville transfigurated the front of their truck so as to possess six deadly looking spikes to ram through the troop truck they aimed for—although that particular action also shorted out the truck's electrical system as well.

Naturally, the soldiers in the conductor cabins all but stumbled out of it, dazed and a little confused due to the heavy impact. The soldiers in the rear, however, had no trouble getting out and quickly fanned out as they began to engage the stunned Spanish soldiers who were providing convoy escort.

Neville himself was one of the first out, dropping to the ground and simultaneously bringing up his sidearm to fire it off at a recuperating Spanish trooper who'd been thrown clear of one of the rammed troop transports.

Feeling something zip right by his head, Neville next turned to see a couple of soldiers levelling their firearms at him shakily and quickly dispatched them as he raised his hand and fire off a transfiguration spell at the ground in front of them, causing spikes to burst out and impale them.

"Fan out! Fireteams move to objective by the numbers!" the sergeant was roaring over the commotion they'd caused by ramming head-first into a convoy. "Secure the civilian vehicles! Take down the guard detail!" he ordered.

So many orders, so little time before the bulk of the Spanish army realized that their precious civilian convoy was under attack and came to obliterate them. Heck, they wouldn't have to wait long for any reinforcements, either, seeing as the convoy was well outside the magical wards of Sagunto, which prevented airborne vehicles from flying within the area.

Fortunately, the surprise attack had the Spanish with their pants down, so Neville was able to quickly formulate a makeshift ward spell that covered the length of the convoy, disrupting any electronics within the convoy and buying the raid some time before the main army at Sagunto noticed something had gone wrong.

The spell done, Neville raised his sidearm and dashed for cover as more Spanish troops raced to meet the raiders, firing their weapons wildly in an effective attempt at suppressing fire. Neville, however, had a very good counter for it.

Closing his eyes, he raised his middle and pointer fingers of his free hand and channelled magic into the ground, causing an earthen barrier to shoot out of the ground.

"Cover formed!" he shouted to his troops. "Move to intercept!"

With a fierce battle cry, a fireteam raced to the newly formed wall and took cover behind it as they opened fire on the advancing Spanish guards, driving the enemy into taking cover as well.

For a moment, Neville wished that the ward hadn't disrupted the radios his detachment carried, but there was no use crying over spilt milk. "Anyone got eyes on the target?" he shouted as he leaned out of cover and fired a shot into a cowering Spanish soldier who'd been peeking out of cover to see if the coast was clear. "Sergeant?"

"Negative, sir!" the sergeant yelled back on the other side of the truck separating them. "Civvie vehicles are towards the rear. We hit the escort contingent!" he reminded Neville.

Neville cursed. "I need a fireteam on me!" he yelled as he broke out of cover and started running towards the back of the convoy.

"Fireteam Charlie! Back up the Lieutenant!" he heard the sergeant roar over the constant sound of gunfire.

It took a few moments, during which Neville was essentially storming the rear of the convoy by himself, but soon enough he heard gunfire to his right and knew the assigned fireteam had caught up with him.

"Fireteam Charlie, report!" he yelled. More sound of gunfire.

"Sir! Corporal Donahue reporting!" he heard the response. "Looks like bodyguards filtering out of the civvie vehicles! We're being pinned down one car north!"

Neville swore and quickly skidded to a halt as he stopped his charge in front of an obviously armoured car, judging by the lack of penetration from British gunfire. Indeed, he could see bodyguards taking cover behind open doors—also heavily armoured, it seemed—taking potshots at his men.

Well, to hell with that.

Neville holstered his sidearm and raised both hands. With a grunt, he felt a pulse of magic shoot out towards the car, which immediately bent to the magic's will. Within moments, the whole car was a metallic reproduction of a porcupine, impaling the bodyguards outside and anyone who might still be inside. No sense taking chances.

"Clear?" yelled Neville. Good grief, by the end of the mission, it wouldn't be surprising if they all went weeks with a sore throat!

"Clear!" Donahue replied as he and his team moved into view and deftly avoided the bloodied spikes from the car. "Moving up!"

Neville nodded as he drew his firearm again and moved in sync with the fireteam, accurately shooting any bodyguard who came into view. If there was one thing to be said about Auror training, it was that their accuracy training was second to none.

A bodyguard soon surprised Neville as he stepped into view just seconds before Neville would crash into him. Knowing there was no way to slow down in time, Neville simply hopped, kneed the bastard in the face, and dropped on his feet, turning only to fire into the man as he lay there with a broken nose, dazed by whatever the hell had just happened. He was dead a second later.

Neville continued his charge until they reached the halfway point, where he began to wonder where the hell the presidential car was. Or Prime Ministerial. Whatever.

"Any sign of the target?" he yelled.

A spatter of gunfire. "Negative, sir!" Donahue replied. "No marked cars in sight!"

Neville cursed. "Damnit!" he yelled to himself, before adding to Donahue. "Check each one! One by one!"

"Sir!"

There was no question as to whether the fireteam would recognize the Prime Minister or not. Each individual British soldier was issued a pack of playing cards that had a picture of a highly valued target on each card. It was something they'd picked up from the Americans, and it had taken to water amongst the British troops.

The problem was finding the weasel bastard. Apparently the Spanish hadn't been taking any chances and had made up the civilian part of the convoy as indistinguishable from each other as possible, and it was working. Between him and the fireteam, Neville could only count with five troopers, himself included. They had maybe ten cars to go through—excluding the one making a porcupine impression—and there was no telling whether any of the cowering passengers inside the intact cars were armed.

Neville swore. "Pair up!" he ordered. "Odd man out on me! One pair per car!"

Immediately, the fireteam split into pairs and the odd man out, a Private with short brown hair whose nametag read Billson, slid over the trunk of one of the armoured cars to link up with him. Immediately, Neville nodded at Private Billson and motioned to the car.

"Door," he said simply.

With a nod, Billson levelled his weapon in one hand as he reached for the door clasp and pulled, opening the door while Neville held up his firearm to shoot any hiding hostiles.

No one inside. A bodyguard car, it seemed.

"Clear," he said calmly. "Next car, go."

Again, a nod in response as the young man dashed to the next car, Neville right behind him, this time taking his spot next to the car door. He saw the soldier lift his assault rifle and nod. With a yank, the door opened and the Billson narrowed his eyes.

"Hands in the air!" he shouted, making Neville step up next to him and raise his own sidearm.

"Hands in the goddamn air!" he added to the soldier's shouts. Unfortunately, it wasn't their target they found, but rather what seemed to be a gaggle of officials who were no doubt also trying to escape.

"I don't see him, sir," Billson spoke up.

"Next car," Neville said simply.

"WE GOT HIM!" Neville heard Donahue shout further down the line of cars. "WE GOT THE BASTARD!"

Both Billson and Neville's heads shot up at that moment, and one of the officials in the car decided to take advantage of that momentary distraction to play hero. Unfortunately, this wasn't an action movie, and the man wasn't Bruce Willis or any other action star. Thus, for trying to get a grip on Billson's assault rifle, the man got instinctively sprayed with bullets until the inside of the car was rife with his blood.

"STAY THE FUCK WHERE YOU ARE!" Billson shouted furiously at the now utterly terrified civilians inside. "The next fucking wanker who moves gets a bullet in their gob, got it?"

Neville heard the few women inside the car whimper and a whole lot of what sounded like prayer before he clapped a hand on Billson's shoulder, which was shaking, oddly enough. "Private, let's go. We've got a war to win."

Billson took a moment to collect himself before he nodded and backed off from the opening, his weapon still levelled at the blood-drenched innards of the car. When they were both sure they were out of grasping or heroics reach, Neville and he turned to jog over to where Corporal Donahue stood looking like he'd won the lottery thirty times over. Kneeling by the rest of his fireteam was an older man, his hands clasped behind his head and rocking himself ever so slightly while making almost inaudible whimpers.

"This him?" Neville asked sceptically as he observed the man who'd launched a war on his country.

Donahue grinned. "Don't look like a prized terrier, but that's the wanker indeed, sir," he affirmed all smiles. "Just needed to stick a gun in some berk's face and they gave up ol' sniffles here quicker than a tart loses her clothes."

Neville grinned at the very vulgar way Donahue had described the capture and clapped him on the shoulder. "Donahue, I do think you've just won us our war," Neville asserted. "Next three rounds are on me."

"Three? I expect free ale and loose skirts for life!" One of the Prime Minister's guards spoke up.

While the fireteam had a laugh at that, Neville climbed up on top of the car and then hoped onto the truck at the front of the civilian part of the convoy. He couldn't just yet see the Sergeant or the rest of the detachment, but the sound of gunfire told him the fight along the convoy was still going on. Time to put a stop to that, then.

He turned to face the fireteam. "Hog-tie the wanker and let's go," he ordered as he jumped down onto the civilian car's hood and then onto the ground. "More fighting to be done, and I expect this fella," he grabbed the Prime Minister by the neck with his arm. "Will make a bloody good bullet shield."

The fighting didn't stop the moment the Spanish Prime Minister was captured, however. Unlike a game, real combat tends to go on until everyone hears the news or one side is dead. Fortunately, the former option occurred in Sagunto as the battle began reaching its fever pitch.

The beleaguered British defenders, having suddenly rallied around a surprise attack that split the Spanish forces in two, had sallied out, led by the Military Mages, to retake the town in a last-ditch attempt at blitzing their way into victory. At the head of the sallying action was Harry himself, whose twin Fiendfyre snake constructs went through the Spanish troops like water through toilet paper.

Thus, when the news filtered in that the Prime Minister of Spain—the real culprit behind the devastating war—had been captured, Harry and his men were smack dab in the middle of fierce street fighting. While many Spanish troopers who heard the news

surrendered almost immediately, there were still a few who hadn't heard the news or refused to bow to the inevitable, and kept fighting.

The result was that up to three hours after the news hit the Spanish HQ in Sagunto, fighting was still rife in parts of the city, where mostly fanatical troops held on against the reinvigorated British forces.

It was a testament to the fighting's intensity, in fact, that when Harry, Speirs, and General Alejandro Ruiz-Perez all met to settle the terms of surrender, none of the three men were in any way, shape, or form presentable according to typical codes of dress for such a situation. Speirs' uniform was torn at various places and smudged with dirt nearly everywhere, and his helmet was missing—presumably riddled with holes when he ducked in the nick of time as a Spanish HMG position opened fire on him during the sallying action. Harry's uniform was singed from his own magical flames and had one sleeve nearly shredded entirely from the intense street fighting, and he was limping from a nasty gash in his left leg—now professionally bandaged. General Ruiz-Perez, the best dressed of the three, had his uniform covered in dust, dirt, and torn at the seams. All in all, one would have never imagined their meeting, set up in a bombed out home, to be one that would end the war. It certainly would have never matched the public's imagination as to how these proceedings went.

And yet, went they did. Realizing the fact that he was finished, General Ruiz-Perez placed his sidearm, holster and all, on the table between him and Harry and Speirs. "I ask only that my men be spared from any ignoble retaliation, General White," he said, his voice thickly accented with his native Spanish. "Whatever the differences between our countries, gentlemen do not revenge themselves on those not at fault."

Speirs had then leaned down to whisper in Harry's ear, presumably to advise him on how to proceed. Whatever he heard, Harry seemed willing to take it at face value and nodded to Ruiz-Perez. "Deal, General," he agreed as he took Ruiz-Perez's holstered firearm into his hand and then offered it back. "In return, I want you to order the resistance movement across to stand down."

The Spanish general looked at Harry a little uneasily. "I am not the one responsible for the Resistencia's movements and doings,

General White," he protested. "I am not sure what effect you think my orders will do."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "General, I am fully aware that you, amongst your peers, carry the most weight in terms of fame and influence amongst the populace," he stated bluntly. "They will listen to you. Order them to stand down, or I make no promises regarding anything," he threatened. It was a tenuous threat, and he knew it, especially considering that in terms of military might, the Spanish general had him beat at the moment. His only card in play right now was the fact that the Prime Minister was in his power.

The bluff worked; the Spaniard looked at his counterpart across the table and sighed in defeat as he nodded. "As you say, General White. I will broadcast the order today," he promised.

Harry heard Speirs give a small sigh of relief—practically inaudible—and sympathized with his colleague. The Fifth Army would be able to have a much easier time holding down the occupied sections of Spain if the guerrillas stood down, especially given the difficulty of uprooting such irregular combatants.

It was part of the reason why the Fifth Army, despite being based in Madrid, could not come to their aid with any real quickness. Any forces not already in combat were being tasked with anti-insurgency operations, which was severely draining British resources.

With this, however, the insurgency would hopefully stop, and with that, it would mean that resistance from the Spanish was ultimately futile and doomed.

Harry snapped his fingers and immediately a trooper came forward to stand beside his chair. "Your radio, soldier," he ordered. Harry had picked this specific soldier for the sole reason of still having a functional radio, courtesy of the man's guard duty over the civilians who had been hiding in Sagunto Castle. The thick, magically reinforced walls had done well to protect the piece of equipment.

With due speed, the soldier unclasped his holding pouch and dug out his handheld radio, passing it to Harry, who then placed it on the table before the Spanish general.

"No time like the present, General," he stated calmly.

The Spaniard had a brief look of distaste, as though he hated being cornered and push around like this, but picked up the handheld without vocal protest. Observing the channel, he pressed the dials to the appropriate channel and brought up the radio to his mouth, pressing the talk button and glancing momentarily at Harry, as though sizing him up.

He paused for a moment, reluctant to continue, but then opened his mouth. "Habla el General Ruíz Perez del Segundo Ejército Real," he stated in Catalonian-accented Spanish. "A todas las fuerzas regulares e irregulars que puedan oir este mensaje. El Primer Ministro ha sido capturado y ha capitulado. Repito, el Primer Ministro ha sido capturado y ha capitulado. Bajen sus armas y rindanse ante las fuerzas Inglesas. La guerra ha acabado. Hemos perdido. Fin de mensaje."

He let go of the talk button and waited now—everyone in the room did, anxious to see what would happen. Would the troops and irregular forces obey? Would they not? Everyone waited with baited breath.

One minute. Two. Five. Ten.

Nothing seemed to be happening, and as Harry began to conclude that this apparent war hero had indeed very little clout amongst the Spanish irregulars and the other combatants still fighting the British tooth and nail, the radio suddenly crackled to life.

"General, mensaje copiado," a defeated-sounding voice rang out from the handheld, which was still in the general's hand. "El Decimo-Tercero regimento de Barcelona está bajando sus armas. Hemos reenviado su mensaje, y tenemos confirmación que la Resistencia de Barcelona se ha comenzado a rendir."

The Spanish general was grim faced as he listened to the radio report. "Barcelona is yours, General White," he said evenly, despite the obvious pain in his eyes. "I dare say this will be the first of a torrent of such reports, if our most ardent fighters are surrendering so fast."

Harry nodded, a pleased, yet equally grim look in his eyes. "I certainly hope so, General," he said. "This war has gone long enough."

Even as he spoke these words, the radio, as the Spaniard had predicted, buzzed to life as report after report came in of Spanish forces declaring their intentions to surrender, intermingled with a few here and there that refused to do so. All the while, General Ruíz-Perez could do nothing but listen as his country fell to a foreign army.

Speirs, meanwhile, looked relieved that everything was going so well, and bent down to whisper to Harry.

"I didn't know those radios had such output as to reach Barcelona," he observed wryly.

Harry had to suppress a smile. "They don't."

"Then?"

"We recovered relaying equipment from the Spanish during the sallying action. It's boosting the signal to Madrid and other regional centres," Harry explained. "When Madrid heard the message, they probably retransmitted it to the rest of Spain."

Speirs nodded. "Good thinking," he said softly. "But how did you know he'd agree to send the message?" he asked.

"I didn't," Harry replied honestly. "It was a gamble."

Speirs looked a little shocked, but then smiled approvingly as he glanced to the defeated Spanish general, who remained stiff at attention and his head bowed in defeat as the reports came filtering in. "Well, congratulations then; your gamble worked."

The war was over.

But even as the British soldiers in Spain celebrated, the gathering storm clouds of another conflict were already forming up in the horizon. That was the problem with wars—no matter how many you stamped out, another one was ready to take its place.

And this one would change the world.

London, United Kingdom, October 15th, 2010 (D-Day +617 – VS-Day)…

"So, tell me again why the Spanish Prime Minister just happened to be heading for Sagunto?"

Sirius grinned at his old friend as he returned a book he'd been reading to its place on his bookshelf. "It's not that hard, Remus," he chided playfully. "Barcelona was under siege by two full field armies, and they had only two to defend the city with. Even if the First and Third somehow botched it up, that still leaves the Second, Fourth, and Fifth Armies to finish the job—they didn't have that same amount of backup. So, they decided to evacuate," he explained as he picked another book and drew it out, observing its well-worn green cover.

A book on Metternich. Why not? Could be interesting.

Remus, meanwhile, was sitting in a comfortable lounge chair his oldest friend in the world had offered him in his study. "So they decided to run?" he asked, the movement of his mouth making the triple scars on his face twitch ever so slightly; a parting gift from a particularly vicious Werewolf in Europe.

Sirius nodded. "Correct," he confirmed. "Intel that the First Army recovered confirms that the Prime Minister panicked and ordered a retreat to Mallorca," he told Remus as he drummed his thumbs on the book cover. He then raised it with one hand towards Remus, giving his friend a sly grin. "The bugger thought that if they could hold out in Mallorca, we would send our armies after him and destroy ourselves in trying to take the island."

Remus shook his head in amazement. "Utterly foolish," he judged. "Mallorca would've been bombed into submission."

Sirius chuckled as he moved back to his desk and sat in his office chair. He closed his eyes in contentment as it perfectly moulded to his figure. "That's what the bastard's officers said," he told Remus. "He didn't care. Ordered what was left of the Second Royal Army to escort him and his cabinet to Sagunto and board ships for Mallorca. Air was too dangerous, and they still had a fleet of ships in the Mediterranean that the Royal Navy hadn't sunk," he added.

"Harry got lucky," Remus noted. "If it hadn't been for the Prime Minister being a coward, he and the rest of his forces would've gotten butchered eventually," he noted. "Did you see the casualty rate for his forces at Sagunto? Makes me sick just looking at it."

Sirius nodded grimly. "Aye. He had to file an official report, so all of Parliament saw how precarious the situation was," he informed Remus before smiling thinly. "On the plus side, it's made it impossible for the military to deny him any promotions, whatever the brass' misgivings about him."

"Oh?"

Sirius nodded. "Harry is now a bona fide General," he announced proudly. "Crown, pip, and sword and baton—the whole deal. Four star man of wonder," he added jocularly. "He's also got himself an admirer, it seems," he added with a chuckle. "General Curtis has been tracking his progress, and allegedly said that he was, and I quote, 'the only man amongst the officers,' for having had the nerve to stand his ground at Sagunto."

Remus raised an eyebrow at that, and Sirius snickered as he opened his book. "I may have paraphrased the second part. Word has it there were quite a few outraged officers when she said what she actually said."

"I bet," Remus observed wryly. "So when's Harry due back?"

"Last I heard, he should be arriving in two days," Sirius said with a smile. "By then, Warwick will have raised quite the media storm to bolster his already enormous reputation."

The intercom on his phone rang then, surprising both men, though Sirius reacted with well-practiced nonchalance as he pressed the speaker button. "Yes?" he asked.

"Sir, Baron Warwick is on the phone; shall I patch him through?" the musical, incorporeal sound of his secretary's voice asked.

Sirius and Remus exchanged glances at this point—one worried, one suddenly grim and determined—just as Sirius pushed the talk button again. "Speak of the devil…Patch him through, Emily," he

ordered, and moments later the phone began ringing with a dual-tone.

Sparing it only two rings, Sirius pressed the loudspeaker button. "Joshua, nice to hear from you," he said pleasantly.

"Same to you, old chap. Unfortunately, I believe we're going to have to dispose of the pleasantries," the Baron's voice said before he paused for a beat. "Something's happened, and Parliament's in a right fit."

"Oh?" Sirius asked, catching Remus' increasingly anxious gaze, and making a hand sign near his throat to make sure Remus understood that he had to stay quiet. "Do tell."

"Riot broke out this morning along Tower Hill Road," Warwick said. "Big one. At least twenty dead, maybe six times that in wounded."

"I'd heard, yes," Sirius answered levelly. "My understanding is that the uniforms managed to contain it, though, so what's this about?"

There was a pause again, like Warwick was himself trying to process what he knew. "Someone's stolen the Imperial State Crown," he finally said.

Post-AN: So, this chapter essentially finishes what I imagine to be the "Origins Arc," whereby Harry's childhood, his training, and rise to a position of fame are covered. Next up should be the "Rise to Power Arc," which is pretty self-explanatory.

If people feel the initial dialogue is odd, I might be revising it at a later point. Also, about the foreign-language parts, I'm not translating them because, really, they don't really have any sort of massive, storyline impact that hasn't been brought up in English subsequently. Cheers. - MB.

London, United Kingdom, October 20th, 2010…

That the military emergency government was quickly wearing thin on the civilian population was no secret at all. However, that it was so incompetent so as to lose one of the crowning symbols of the nation…that was simply the last straw for many a discontent civilian.

It barely took two days for the disappearance of the crown to become widely known, and soon after that, the riots in the streets intensified to such a point that even the Armed Forces detachments sent to reinforce the riot police were beginning to feel overwhelmed.

It barely helped the government that at the same time, Harry and the first of the British troops deployed to Spain arrived. In fact, for these hardened veterans, it seemed a sort of malicious joke that the country they had been fighting to defend and avenge for over a year now had descended into quasi-anarchy, perpetuated by what seemed to be a wholly inefficient government.

As a result, the flood of incoming veterans were none too pleased with the government, with the vast majority refusing to comply with orders to deploy against civilian riots, while not participating in these either. Most of these war-hardened soldiers simply decided to stand aside and let the bunglers fix their own mess, but Harry knew better.

That the troops refused to cooperate with the government was magnificent news for him. Discontent troops were the most liable to be influenced, and while the Liverpudlians would follow his lead almost unquestioningly, he could not say the same of the other regiments who, despite being indebted to him, owed him no hierarchical loyalty.

Harry knew this, and he knew that no amount of wartime experience would bridge that gap, so he went for another avenue of approach: their families. Sirius was the best candidate for this task, and so Harry quickly put his "uncle" to work as a sympathetic politician who, despite being harassed by the upper ranks of the military, still had enough time to visit the families of veterans and provide them with funds to survive through the growing anarchy.

They were lucky, then, that their cause's war chest was so richly funded—anyone else might've gone broke. Yet, between the Black fortune, the Potter's, the Goblins' substantial investments, and quite

a few many other investors providing Harry's cause with the appropriate money, financial soundness was not exactly at the top of their worries.

On the other hand, it was incredibly telling of the many powerful people who wanted in on Harry's vision of a new world. It also said a lot about how many interests Harry had to satisfy to keep these people interested.

One of these investors, in fact, seemed quite mad at him, and was currently storming around Harry's office.

"You swore! You swore nothing would happen to the monarchy!" Joshua was raging. "That was our deal, Harry!"

Harry tracked his friend with his eyes as the man went one way, then another. His hands were clasped on the desk, his expression neutral and serious. "I have not broken the deal, Joshua. The monarchy is still in place," he reminded his friend.

"And the crown?" demanded Joshua as he came to a stop in front of the desk. "Our most sacred symbol, after the throne?"

"I didn't steal the crown," Harry again reminded his friend.

Joshua narrowed his eyes. "You had a hand in it, though, didn't you?" he pressed. "Of course you did. There's no way an operation like that is pulled off without someone in your pocket getting notified."

"You overestimate my reach, Joshua."

"I think I rather underestimate it, actually," Baron Warwick replied sardonically. "Every time Sirius and I have a chat, I keep hearing of new, miraculous events occurring that somehow manage to always swing in your favour. No one's that lucky."

Harry's own gaze narrowed now. "Joshua, tread carefully. You know that I can only divulge what will not compromise the identity of some of our other backers," he pointed out. "Just like I keep the depth of your involvement a secret from my other associates."

"Just tell me this, then. Did you have anything to do with the theft of the Imperial Crown?" Joshua asked point-blank.

Harry stared hard at Joshua for a moment before replying.

"Yes," he replied honestly.

Joshua seemed livid for a moment, but then relented enough to regain control and instead ask, through gritted teeth, "Why?"

"Look outside," Harry said. "What do you see?" he then asked as he watched his friend reluctantly move towards the window.

"Another riot," Joshua said with some disgust. "Why can't we hear them?"

"Magic," Harry replied promptly with a mischievous smile.

"What's your point, Harry?" Joshua asked, a little exasperated.

"That riot is symptomatic of the society we live in, now that magic has come out to light," Harry explained. "It's magnified every problem we had prior to magic's reveal, too. Gas prices have skyrocketed, magical riots have caused wide-spread blackouts…"

"Yes, yes, it's bloody well anarchy out there," Joshua interrupted impatiently. "What's your point?" he pressed again.

Harry gave his friend an annoyed look before relenting. "The point is…I'm accelerating what would have happened anyway," Harry explained. "If I hadn't ordered the robbery, the process would've been slower, more drawn out and traumatic."

"What process? What on earth are you talking about?" Joshua asked, still quite confused.

"At one point or another, someone in the provisional government—probably some high-ranking military officer—would've declared the king unfit and tried to take over," Harry explained. "Most likely, someone unfriendly towards magic users, and in full control of the government. The result of that would be….catastrophic."

Harry got up from his chair and walked towards another window, joining in on watching the developing riot in the street in front of the Ministry of Defence. "Now, though, there is no control. There is no chance of any would-be ruler to take power and immediately impose an anti-mage agenda. The country is splintering, and the king is safely still on the throne as the only legitimizing factor of this power struggle."

"I think you underestimate your opponents, Harry," Joshua opined. "Your enemies are not few, and they are not incapable. There will be resistance."

"Out of all of them, I count only four who are truly a danger," Harry countered. "Generals Taylor, Thompson, Hughes, and Morris."

Joshua's gaze sharpened. "The Chiefs of Staff?" he asked, very well aware of the four men Harry was cautious of. None of them had been the incumbents when the MoD had been attacked, but had essentially negotiated, bribed, and threatened their way up to their respective posts. Each wielded considerable influence, but all were deeply flawed.

Taylor, Joshua knew, was rumoured to be paranoid, believing any officer junior to him to be seeking his place as Chief of the General Staff. Thompson, the Chief of the Air Staff, was arrogant and brutal, and was the most vocal proponent of using troops to put down the riots. Hughes, the First Sea Lord, was far more sanguine, and on the outside seemed the most honourable of the four, but was rumoured to have had the legal successor of the position assassinated to advance himself. Finally, Morris, the sole member of the group that held no official Chief of Staff position, but sat as the Chief of Defence Staff by virtue of being a compromise candidate, though Joshua wasn't so convinced.

Morris was, in the opinion of the entire civil government, the most dangerous of the lot, having a mild manner that was eerily out of place among the other three heads of service. He never seemed troubled, and more than once managed to shoot down Thompson's proposals to use troops to quell the disturbances, but something about him seemed off to Joshua. For one, Thompson was scared of him.

Harry, in turn, nodded at his friend's confirming question. "Yes," he stated. "Taylor has been arguing for the disbandment of the mage troops in the army, but our allies are stalling his efforts. He fears we're the biggest threat to his power," he added with a smile, raising his hand just enough to point a finger at an incoming Molotov cocktail and cause the flames to expand such that it exploded mid-air.

"He's right," Joshua stated blandly, barely flinching now at the sight of Harry's magic at work. "You are."

"Perhaps," Harry conceded. "But to digress back to our point—this is why I need this chaos. Now. Here. Just as the four of them are only starting to consolidate their power."

"Perhaps there is some wisdom to what you say, then," Joshua agreed reluctantly. "But in that case, I would advise you endear yourself to His Majesty."

That caught Harry's attention. Joshua was typically averse to Harry having any sort of contact with the monarch, mostly due to the fear that Harry would do away with him. "I'm listening," he said cautiously.

"If the king sits on the throne, but the servants are incapable of safeguarding his person and possessions, then the natural conclusion is that someone more capable should take over," Joshua analysed. "He whom His Majesty chooses would thus gain the legitimacy of being handpicked by the legitimate sovereign."

"Use the King to suppress the rebellious subjects," Harry mused out loud with a small smile. "I had thought of it, but hadn't given it much serious thought, given my status as a mage. Perhaps you are right, however, and this chaos could be used to advance our agenda more directly, rather than through the shadows as I had planned."

He thumbed his chin pensively as he thought on Joshua's plan. It called for a more direct approach than he was used to, but perhaps that was necessary. His original plan called for a subtle elimination of adverse influences until he could breeze his way into power in the emergency government. However, as Joshua had said, the king could be a majorly beneficial influence on his rise to power.

"The chaos, as you've said, is magnifying our problems, Harry," Joshua continued. "Electricity, water, petrol prices…everything's spiralling out of control, and the people are blaming our enemies. We should take advantage of this by making you the beacon of their hopes. To that end, I propose you relocate to Liverpool, where the crisis is much worse, and work towards stabilizing the area. This should send a clear message to the public that someone is working towards making their lives bearable in this time of chaos."

Harry nodded, becoming convinced of Joshua's arguments but unwilling to vocalize his agreement until he was absolutely certain this was the path to take.

"The capital will need tending to," he remarked idly, voicing his final concern before agreeing. "I cannot manage Liverpool and London at the same time, not with this utter chaos threatening to swallow the country."

Joshua gave a small bow, a little smile finally appearing on his face. "Leave London to Sirius and I," he advised. "Between us, the civil government is on the right track, even if our support within the military is severely limited."

Harry nodded again, finally convinced. "Very well," he conceded, raising a fist to point to Joshua. "I will put in my transfer request for Liverpool as soon as possible, and will leave things here to you. Taylor will no doubt believe this to be a surrender on my part, so he will allow this to happen unopposed. It doesn't affect the others' plans, so they will not interfere, either."

"I understand," Joshua acceded to the order. "Sirius and I will keep order here."

Harry nodded. "Good. Furthermore, contact General Curtis and Major General Livingston," he suggested. "They are our strongest allies in the military."

Joshua raised an eyebrow at the names. "Curtis?" he asked sceptically.

Harry grinned. "Whatever her manners, she's a capable officer, and just as much an enemy of Taylor's as we are." Except, in her case it was deliberate, as she really was trying to depose the older man.

"Coordinate with her in order to stem the Chiefs of Staff from completely taking over while I'm away."

Joshua nodded. "I understand," he acquiesced, a little reluctantly.

Harry put a hand on the older man's shoulders, giving him a sincere smile. "Don't look so put out, Joshua," he reassured the older man. "I'm sure you two will get along splendidly."

Joshua's honest grimace made Harry laugh.

Bootle, United Kingdom, November 27th, 2010…

As it turned out, Joshua was absolutely correct.

Harry's departure from London was perceived in two ways. The upper echelons of the military who resented him deemed it a surrender of sorts, while the people, fuelled by Sirius and Joshua's underground propaganda campaign, came to see it as the military regime chasing him away. Being a war hero, this naturally drew ire from the populace towards the already resented military regime.

The King, too, was said to sympathize with Harry's plight, which Sirius reported had drawn a lot of concern from certain, more even-minded military officers who had sought Harry's removal.

Harry, however, was now out of their reach. While the capital defence forces would answer to them, the regime's hold on the military grew more tenuous as one drew away from the capital. Thus, Liverpool was practically independent of London control, only kept from outright independence by its traditional allegiance to a central government that was slowly being blinked out of existence. The same scenario was applicable to essentially any of the cities on the fringes of British territory.

However, instead of decaying even more quickly into anarchy, Liverpool was spared from the fate that other cities suffered, such as Leeds and Newcastle, where the rioting had all but dissolved any sense of normalcy. With the presence of the newly returned Liverpudlian regiments and the man the whole nation considered a war hero, order was quickly restored as Harry used the regiments to help the police forces re-establish order.

Not everything was about the use of force, however. Harry took great care in preserving the image of being a faithful servant of the civilian administration.

Only the most wicked amongst the criminals had the soldiers after them. The rest were dealt with accordingly by way of police forces and the military-backed civilian courts.

Furthermore, he had the troops aid in reconstruction efforts wherever the rioting had gotten out of hand, and quickly had the public transport systems working again, which relieved many a person who just wanted to go to work. The streets were cleared of riots, and rule of law reinforced.

However, the woes of the city were not so easily relieved as that. Petrol prices were still through the roof, and food was becoming scarce as the arable regions of England all but ceased functioning or trading. They couldn't rely on London, either, or on imports—given the chaotic state the world was in. Thus, Harry had to take it upon himself to direct the Liverpudlian regiments into the areas surrounding Liverpool and settle things there in order to provide food for his people.

Effectively, thus, Harry controlled Merseyside.

And even then, it wasn't enough. Harry knew that Merseyside alone could not sustain itself indefinitely, and what little they had achieved would all come crumbling down without emergency interference. Thus, Harry turned to his mages.

"You can't be serious."

Harry had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes as one of the local council representatives objected to his emergency plan for food production. Honestly, why did people have to be so short-sighted?

"Sit down," Harry ordered, one of his guardsmen, a veteran of practically every battle Harry had fought in during the Anglo-Spanish War, glowering at the man for additional effect. It worked; within moments, the man was sitting quietly and sullenly. "And I assure you, I'm perfectly serious."

Elicia—his ever faithful, ever adored Elicia—stepped forward then, bringing the council's attention to her. "Having this policy enacted would ensure that we can feed everyone in Merseyside," she informed the gathering. "As it stands, we are barely able to supply enough food for two meals a day. In a matter of months, if not weeks, that will dwindle to a single ration, with total collapse occurring shortly thereafter. This proposal will see to it that your harvests increase by over three hundred per cent!"

Xenophilius, standing to the other side of Harry, nodded in agreement. "We have many agricultural specialists among the registered mages who would be happy to lend their assistance," he added in. "Halton and Wirral have already agreed to our terms, and Knowsley is due to give their answer to us within a matter of days."

The councilmembers for Sefton fidgeted uncomfortably at the pressure the two advisors were putting on them. It wasn't that their facts were wrong, but rather that the solution they were proposing for the alleviation of the food problem was…well…scandalous, to say the least. Using magic to increase the crop yields of their admittedly comparatively small fields was an option many of them refused to consider outright, but as the hunger began settling in, such a stubborn attitude was becoming harder to maintain in the face of potential food riots.

"You must understand," one of the councilmembers pleaded, leaning forward. "The crisis in London, the magic riots…it's all left a very sour taste in the people's mouths regarding the use of magic."

Harry nodded. "I do understand, councilman, and yet that sour taste is quickly being replaced by hunger," he reminded them. "Additionally, these were unregistered mages who brought such pain on us. However, thousands of British lives have been saved by mages on the battlefield-good, loyal mages. We just ask that you allow a few more of these mages to save the lives of our boroughs."

He then glanced up at Xenophilius, who nodded at the council. "Furthermore, we are aware that you've all been having issues regarding robber gangs on the road to Formby and Southport," he mentioned. "As recompense for your tolerance, we will be deploying a company of soldiers to help bolster the local citizen guard, secure the roads, and protect the fields."

It was blackmail of the most terrible sort, but necessary. The people before Harry's delegation knew that the robber gangs were crippling the infrastructure of the region, and just trying to travel from Bootle to Formby was considered dangerous during the night, and at times even during the day. Ice Blundell, between Bootle and Formby, had all but been overrun by the robbers, making that particular stretch a particularly hazardous region to cross.

It was ridiculous, really. In a car, it would take a pitiful amount of time to travel from Bootle to Southport, but the petrol prices had made it necessary for all gasoline to be stockpiled for public transport services. That meant slower vehicles that the robbers could more easily intercept and overrun.

The councilmembers, however, were thankfully not so cunning as to realize that the delegation before them was effectively extorting them for their cooperation. Instead, they merely saw the soldiers as the gift they appeared to be. "T-That would be wonderful!" one of them said, shocked at the offer. "Thank you, General White!"

Harry smiled kindly at the thanks, though he knew that he had just used methods that were anything but honourable. Nonetheless, it was necessary for the stabilization of the North-West, and a good step towards showing the people of the isles that not all mages were out to get them.

"Then can we presume to have your cooperation on this?" he asked, just to make sure. After all, without a clear statement of agreement, the council could back out at any moment. Thankfully, he didn't seem to have to press any further as the councilmembers eyed each other and nodded.

"You have it," confirmed an elderly councilwoman. "Sefton will follow with your recommendation, General White."

Harry gave a gracious nod of thanks as Xenophilius subtly reached into his pocket and turned off the recording device they'd brought along for evidence, should any of the negotiating parties decide to back out at a later date. Elicia, for her part, smiled at the council members and gave a short curtsy.

"The people of Liverpool thank you for your foresight," Harry laid on the praise, knowing that it would stroke the council's egos to think

that a city might owe them something. "Very soon, I believe all our food woes shall be over."

Standing from his seat before the council, Harry patted down his uniform to get out the wrinkles that came from sitting as Xenophilius and Elicia moved forward to shake hands with the councilmembers, who were thanking them over and over for the help they would receive against the robber gangs.

He, of course, gave the odd handshake and made small-talk with the councilmembers, who seemed surprised at how approachable he was outside of official negotiations despite his magical background. A good thing, as it reinforced the image that he was as normal as they were, except with magical talents.

Before long, however, Harry and his delegation had left the building, fastening their coats as much as possible against the biting cold of winter. Elicia began trembling almost immediately, but settled once Harry put his arm around her waist. Xenophilius, apparently more at home with such extreme temperature—or very much in control of his reactions—seemed impervious to the cold, not even shaking once as they waited for then got into the government car that was to pick them up.

Once inside, Harry pulled off his gloves and rubbed some warmth into them, smiling as Elicia brought them into her own and helped to bring warmth to both their hands. "That went well," she noted, smiling to herself as she felt the warmth return to her hands and Harry's.

Xenophilius nodded, leaning back against his seat with his eyes closed, glad to finally relax. "With Sefton behind us, Cheshire is sure to fall in line, too," he guessed. "With that, Liverpool's surrounding areas are secure and under our control. We should be able to start expanding our sphere of influence towards Manchester now."

"Isn't that a little hasty?" asked Elicia worriedly. "If you make a move so quickly, the Chiefs of Staff will be a lot more alert about our region."

Harry eyed Xenophilius with a smirk. "She has a point. Rebuttal?"

Xenophilius harrumphed, but then went quiet for a moment as his eyebrows scrunched in thought. "If we can get Curtis to—" he was interrupted mid-thought as the car came to an abrupt stop. Elicia squeaked in surprise.

"What on earth…?" Xenophilius mumbled as he turned to face the driver's compartment, whose separating window was rolling down. "What's the meaning of this?"

The driver seemed a little nonplussed, but the guard beside him was grim-faced and had his jaw set, the tell-tale clicking noise of his sidearm's safety ringing moments later. "Looks like protesters, sir," the driver reported dutifully.

Xenophilius grunted in acknowledgement, though Elicia seemed surprised, while Harry remained stoic. "Protesters? Didn't our troops secure the area before we got here?" she asked, a little alarmed and disappointed that Harry's personal guards had dropped the ball to this extent.

Xenophilius frowned. "They did," Harry confirmed as he pulled out a radio and turned it on. Bringing it to his lips, he pressed down on the talk button. "Thunder-One to Vigil teams, report in, over."

The occupants of the car waited for a moment as static noise filled their ears. Pressing down on the button again, Harry repeated his call, with similar results.

"Sir?" asked the guard, his face failing to mask his growing apprehension.

Harry glared at the radio before tossing it to Xenophilius. "Keep trying," he ordered before turning his attention to Elicia. "Keep your head down, love," he told her, smiling as she nodded back and then leaned in for a comforting kiss.

The moment was soon over, however, and Harry turned to face the driver and guardsman, both of whom were starting to get a bad feeling about the apparent protesters, who hadn't made so much as a shout, thrown a vegetable, or even tried to surround the car. They were simply…standing there. Blocking their path, sure, but just standing there.

"What's your name, trooper?" he asked the driver.

"Ellis, sir."

"Very good, Ellis," he acknowledged as he pulled on a pair of white gloves and tugged them tight against his fingertips. "I want you to keep the engine running. Trooper…"

"Kline, sir."

"Trooper Kline and I," he continued. "Will go investigate. If there's trouble, I want you to back up the car and go straight back to the town council and radio in for reinforcements from Liverpool. If not, we should be right back. Understood?" he asked both men.

"Yes, sir!" the two men chorused, making Harry smile at their eagerness.

"Very good. Trooper Kline, on me," Harry ordered as he moved to get out of the car. He was stopped, however, by Elicia's hold on his arm.

"Be careful," she pleaded.

Harry flashed her a smile. "Always am," he assured her before glancing at Xenophilius and nodding at him.

"Sure you don't need my help?" the older mage asked.

"If something goes wrong, someone with the proper authorization codes will be needed to verify my command for reinforcements, and only two people in this car have them: you and me," Harry reminded him before flashing another smile. "Besides, I need someone I trust to keep Ellie safe."

"You can count on me," Xenophilius assured him.

Harry gave him a grateful nod before looking over to Trooper Kline and nodding at him. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be, sir," the man answered honestly.

Harry nodded and pulled on the door handle, opening the door, and got out slowly, his hands a mere snap away from incinerating any threats to his person or the car occupants. Still, the apparent protesters made no move against him, or the car. It was all rather strange, in fact.

Harry eyed the crowd as he passed Trooper Kline, who was using the open door as a sort of body armour, and heard his companion slowly close the door and fall into step to his flank.

"What's all this, then?" he called out to the crowd as he tightened the fast of his greatcoat, having a little underestimated the chill outdoors. To his growing apprehension, none of those in the crowd seemed remotely affected by the elements.

Then, a man seemed to emerge from the crowd. It wasn't that he muscled his way through, or the crowd had parted to reveal him. He literally seemed to emerge from the crowd. Harry could hear Trooper Kline flipping his weapon's firing mode from semi to fully automatic. A wise move—if the crowd proved violent, they would need to provide suppressing fire immediately.

"You're Harry Potter," the man responded to Harry's query, which rang all sorts of alarm bells in his mind. Not that his real name was much of a secret now. Rather, it was the way he completely discarded his alternate identity that worried Harry. Muggles would've known better than to treat him as anything but Brigadier White. Only mages would have no such restraints.

"Who's asking?" Harry demanded as he made a subtle hand gesture that had Kline separate from him and move closer to cover—the corner of a building.

"Sir, something's off," Kline radioed in through Harry's earpiece. "Where are all the folks who live around here?"

Harry was surprised to realize that Kline's observation was spot on. Despite still being in Bootle's residential areas, there didn't seem to be any foot traffic, or even curious faces peering out the windows.

"Don't need to worry about interlopers," the man told Harry with a deranged smile. "They've all been…convinced not to look. Or hear."

"Sir?"

Harry understood the man's meaning immediately, however. "Wards. Notice-Me-Not's and Muggle Repelling, correct?" he asked, privately agreeing with Trooper Kline when the man began cursing through the radio. "Must've taken a while to set these up."

The man gave an ugly smile then, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out his wand. "So many questions," the man crooned. "Curious little tosser, aren't you?"

Harry, in turn, offered up a charming smile as he curled his fingers and brought up his hands, ready to incinerate anyone who tried something. "I just want to know who to send your ashes to when I'm done with you."

The man's ugly smile turned into a vicious scowl as he brought up his wand and fired off a shot at Harry, who dodged it expertly and snapped his fingers just as the crowd of mages broke ranks and began firing. "Kline, now!" he shouted.

Immediately, the popping sound of a silenced assault rifle being fired could be dimly heard as numerous mages dropped from expert shots to the chest or head. They were good kills, but not nearly enough to relieve their situation.

"Sir, moving up to higher ground!" Kline reported curtly before ceasing his shots and moving inside the building. Harry hoped the man avoided any of the main windows and doors—the wards would probably then knock him out of the fight.

Harry had miscalculated. That was the bottom-line truth of it. He hadn't frankly expected any mage faction to try and off him this early on, given the utter chaos of the refugee problem and their own civil war between the Death Eaters and everyone else. This was, in a word, too reckless.

Or was it? Harry could see the beauty in this ploy, he supposed. Quickly crossing his wrists together—a fancy trick Neville had taught him—he transfigured the concrete road in front of him into a rather nice wall that blocked quite a few nasty spells that would've seen him go through a closed-casket funeral.

Harry could understand the attraction of pulling off a surgical strike at him right now. It was no secret to certain mage parties that he was after them, and while the three-way secret war between the Ministry, Death Eaters, and Order of the Phoenix was still going on quite strongly, the Ministry was about to fold up entirely, leaving only the latter two factions standing and able to marshal all their forces for one last strike.

That meant that someone had already seen the endgame, or calculated it, and was now seeking to eliminate the next massive threat practically a year or two in advance of said conclusion. That way, whoever came out victor of the mage civil war would have no big problem waiting for them.

That said, Harry didn't think he knew anyone this insane. If the attack failed—and he was going to do his bloody best to see it fail—then it gave them a steel-clad reason to go to war with the mages.

Although…Harry had to admit the odds of him using it were still quite slim. He was nowhere near ready to take on the mages—he hadn't even managed to take care of the Chiefs of Staff yet!—and perhaps that was why the attack came this prematurely. Whoever the head planner was had realized that even if they handed over a cassus belli on a diamond platter, he could not act on it.

Bottom line, he needed information.

Harry dove to the side as the wall finally broke and snapped his fingers again, lighting up quite a few mages with his fire spells. Though diminished, he could still see a few mages here and there going down from Kline's persistent firing. Unfortunately, they were still quite outnumbered.

"Sir, I'm going to be running out of ammo very, very soon," he heard Kline report in. "Suggest we fall back to the town council and make our stand there."

"And bring this firefight to their doorstep?" Harry questioned dubiously. "They'll think we've lost control of the situation. No," he emphasized with a shake of his head. "We make our stand here."

"…Copy that, sir." Kline was reluctant, but willing to follow him. That said quite a bit of the man's character.

Harry took cover behind the cornerstones of one of the buildings lining the street and pondered using Fiendfyre to eradicate the problem once and for all. He quickly discarded that idea on the grounds of the fact that it would probably take the entire street with it.

No, the wisest thing they could do was hold out until reinforcements arrived from Liverpool, which shouldn't take more than another fifteen minutes.

He heard Kline curse then, and worried his sole ally had been taken down. "Kline, report in!"

"…I'm fine, sir! Nearly got hit in the gob by one of those blighted Killing Curses, though!"

That would do it, in Harry's opinion. It also told him that the enemy was really foregoing the pulling of any punches in dealing with him. They wanted him dead, not caught. He'd have to tip his hat to whoever it was that planned this op—it was quite brutal and vicious.

Then, the spell fire stopped as suddenly as it'd begun. Still taking cover in his corner, he heard the popping sound of Kline's rifle for a handful of seconds more before it, too, stopped firing.

"Come out, Potter!" the man he'd chatted with earlier called out. Harry was surprised the man hadn't died in the brief firefight they'd gone through. "Or are you too much of a coward to face us like a man?"

He heard Kline snort. "…Big words coming from a guy who brings an army to a fistfight," the trooper mumbled, probably unaware of the fact that Harry could hear him. Still, it made him smile in amusement.

"How about you tell me who sent you, and I oblige?" Harry asked, trying to buy himself some time so he could come up with a functional plan for his current predicament. "I think that's only fair, given your unhealthy drive to kill me!"

There was no way that would work. No one was stupid enough to start gloating before the mission was complete.

"Commander Weasley ordered your death, Potter," sneered the man. "Now come out and fight!"

Harry's eyebrows shot upwards as the man spilled his boss' identity so cavalierly. Was the man stupid, or just new at this? Even if it were the latter, surely someone would've told him not to give out such sensitive information?

"…I can't believe that worked," Kline mumbled into his microphone disbelievingly.

"Neither can I," Harry agreed before finally coming up with an endgame plan. Bottom line, he needed those mages gone, and with only Kline as his backup, that didn't leave for very many options. "Kline, how're you on grenades?"

"Full load, sir."

"So five," Harry mumbled to himself. Idly, he cast a spell on the opposing wall of the alley he was in, turning the brick and mortar into reflecting glass, giving him a clear view of the group of mages. "Okay, here's the plan: When I give the signal, throw those grenades smack in the middle of the group, understood?"

"Sir, won't they just bounce off the shields?"

"Not if they've got something else holding their attention," Harry assured the trooper. He'd have to remember to give the man a commendation later for his assistance in this fight. "Ready?"

There was a pause before the radio clicked on again. "Ready, sir."

Drawing in deep breaths, Harry tried to get his heart to stop racing before he made his move. Once he was comfortable—and still ignoring the lead mage's taunts—he closed his eyes, gathered what magic he needed, and readied his spells. Then, just as suddenly as a person being shaken awake, he burst from his position and dashed across the street, one hand extended towards the group, a snap already sounding out.

Almost instantly, the floor in front of the group buckled and collapsed as fire burst from it, incinerating many of them and putting the rest in a panic. The result was erratic, but no less dangerous spell fire that

tested Harry's defensive spells and dodging ability. As good as he was, and as powerful as he was, having over thirty spells slam into one's personal shield could be draining.

Still, he had their attention. Harry gave a vicious smile as he crossed his wrists and transfigured a wall to protect him. "Kline, NOW!" he ordered.

It wasn't instantaneous, but the effects of Harry's plan were apparent the moment the first grenade landed in a hard thud amidst the mages. Such was the haze of their panic that most of them had ignored the sound until it was too late, and as such, many of the shield-bearing mages were instantly killed in the resulting explosion, with many more dying from the subsequent grenades that Kline lobbed in to take advantage of the chaos.

Harry waited for the fifth explosion to go off before even ducking out his head to have a look. The moment it did, he collapsed the wall and charge in to finish off his attackers, each snap of his fingers heralding another mage spontaneously combusting.

"Providing covering fire!" Kline reported in from his perch above the street.

Harry saw many of the bodies suddenly spasm as bullets hit them while on the ground, but paid these no heed. He had only one target in mind, and he thanked his lucky stars that his prey hadn't died in the grenade volley.

The man who'd taunted him was slowly standing up, his expression clearly dazed but equally furious. He was about to throw back his head and howl in said rage when Harry suddenly appeared in front of him and, with one swift strike, grabbed him by the throat and slammed him on the ground, keeping his free fingers ready for a snap and a knee on the man's chest.

"Kline, clean-up duty," he ordered over the radio, his eyes fixed on the fallen mage beneath him. "Once you're done keep an eye out for mage reinforcements."

"Aye, sir."

The radio clicked off, and Harry was left with his prisoner, his features contorted with anger both at the fact that he had failed to predict this ambush and that his plans had very nearly been derailed. "You said Commander Weasley sent you," he reminded his prisoner as he pushed down on the man's chest with his knee. "Which one?"

The man, despite his injuries, gave Harry a vicious, insane grin. "I'll never tell," he taunted. Harry glowered at him.

"Do you know what it feels like to be set on fire?" Harry asked him. "The pain is extraordinary, and most people get to die by smoke inhalation rather than the fire itself."

"S-So?" the mage demanded defiantly.

Harry leaned in, making sure the man could see that he wasn't kidding around. "You won't get that mercy," he threatened. "You'll burn good and well, feeling every second my magic turns you into ash. And it won't be fast, either. I'll make sure of that. Unless you tell me who sent you, specifically," he told the mage.

The mage's eyes cleared themselves a little of the insanity they had shown before, replaced instead with doubt and fear as he realized Harry would make good on his threat. Being burned alive was no pleasant scenario to ponder.

"C-Commander Weasley, like I told you," he finally gave in, though all this did was have Harry squeeze his neck tighter with one hand, while his other hand readied a snap. "I-I'm not lying!" the man managed to choke out.

"Which. One?" Harry repeated slowly. He already had a good idea, but he wanted confirmation.

"D-Don't….know…!" the mage wheezed as air became quite scarce in his lungs.

Harry scowled. Was the man telling the truth? It seemed unlikely—after all, he had provided a rank and family name, so why wouldn't he know who sent him? "You're lying," he decided to accuse the man point blank, just to see if his reaction changed.

It didn't, to Harry's displeased surprise. If anything, it made the man even more desperate. "Please…I…I'm te—telling the t-truth!" the man pleaded. "No name! No person! Just…a signed o-order…in a sealed…" he swallowed desperately. "…envelope!"

Harry's eyes narrowed as he pondered this information. It made things difficult for him, but he could already see how this move was wise. By signing the letter, it ensured Harry was focused on a Weasley, but by not specifying which one, he had no way of knowing which of the seven siblings was the true threat. He had his suspicions, however, that the youngest of them was perhaps responsible for the attack—she was the only one, out of the entire family, who seemed to fit the profile.

However, he had no concrete proof, and that made things problematic. Any good intelligence officer would mention that the signature could easily have been forged, or that this was a ploy to distract him from dealing with the Chiefs of Staff. Whatever sort of ploy it was, however, it was clear that the stakes had risen yet again. If he could not find out who it was that ordered the hit, then he'd have to keep looking over his shoulder—that was unacceptable.

He eyed the captured mage in his grip for a moment, pondering his fate, before he let him go—to the man's relief. However, the moment the man was about to speak, Harry got up and snapped his fingers at him, incinerating the man in seconds.

Ignoring the flash of heat behind him, Harry moved his gaze across the small-scale battlefield. This had been an annoying interlude, but it had been quite informative, in its own way. He would have to step up his campaign against the Chiefs of Staff, it seemed, or else he might not live long enough to seize what was rightfully his.

"Kline, please fetch the others now, if you would," Harry ordered abruptly, his arms crossed as he continued observing the strewn bodies around him. He barely batted an eye at the amount of people he'd killed—a fact that gave him a jolt of worry as to his rapidly evolving jadedness towards the act. Perhaps he'd been in the game too long?

Well, even if he was, he needed to see this through to the bitter end. A man who gave up on his ambitions because of a little unease could not claim to be anyone worth following.

Kline, naturally, was a little hesitant to comply with his order, given that he was Harry's sole backup. "Sir, with all due respect, I believe my place is here," he protested. "I'd much rather not—"

"I'll be fine," Harry cut him off as he remained still, his arms crossed and his gaze on the scene of carnage. "The wards these idiots put up will last a while longer, too, so there shouldn't be much trouble."

Kline hesitated some more, clearly uneasy with leaving the commander of their forces on his own. Nonetheless, he was a veteran of Spain, and he knew how utterly terrifying the man before him could be when unleashed. He hadn't personally attended any of the major sieges, but he had enough friends who had, and their tales of entire areas of the city burning uncontrollably was enough to fuel his nightmares.

"Yes, sir!" he finally complied, saluting Harry before jogging off towards the city council, finally leaving Harry alone among the corpses.

For a moment, Harry did nothing but stand there, still with his arms crossed and his expression pensive. He could feel the cold winter breeze around him, and yet perhaps as a result of the amount of magic he'd channelled, he felt none of the cold.

"You're late," he suddenly said. "Or is it that you were watching?"

"A little of both," a male voice said as a dozen figures suddenly appeared in a wash of magical energy. "We got here just as you finished off the last of them."

Harry was quiet for a while. "Dumbledore's faction is becoming a nuisance, as are the Death Eaters. We cannot afford these factions to come between us and the Chiefs of Staff," he stated simply. "You heard about their leader?" he asked for confirmation.

"Yes. Weasley."

"Assume Ronald, but keep an eye on the one they call Ginny," Harry stated. "I have a feeling that her hand can't be too uninvolved in this attempt."

"She was just a middle-level Auror when I left."

"Time's passed," Harry stated, staring at the bodies strewn around him. "People change. She's very much unlike any other mage I've dealt with from that camp. Don't underestimate her," he warned.

There was a pause and a nod. "Very well. Then…?"

Harry raised a hand and poked his right temple with his index finger. "My head is starting to ache, Neville."

Liverpool, United Kingdom, December 5th, 2011…

"B Section in position."

Harry's revenge was to be swift and brutal. The attack on his person had been inexcusably surprising, and the leader of the Military Mages knew full well that if it leaked out how off guard he'd been caught, his reputation would suffer tremendously for it. As such, it was necessary for him to cow the mages back into focusing on the little civil war.

The extent of his vengeance had been debated vociferously since the moment it had been announced. Some among his staff wanted him to make an example of the mages on a large scale, while others—headed by Elicia, Sirius, and Joshua—felt that a quick, surgical strike was enough to show the mages that Harry wasn't screwing around.

In the end, Harry had been swayed by the latter's arguments, but not without injecting into that solution a good deal of bloody-minded viciousness.

It had taken some small amount of time since then to acquire the necessary information, but once he'd come into it, Harry had unleashed Neville, knowing that the rising star among the Military Mages would see to it that his will be carried out to the fullest extent possible of his orders.

The target was, naturally, an Order of the Phoenix stronghold.

Neville crouched behind a short garden wall in front of the inconspicuous house across the street that served as the regional

safehouse of the Order of the Phoenix, his team similarly crouched to either of his sides. In a few moments, it would serve this purpose no longer.

Neville raised his hand to his communicator and tapped it once lightly. "Delta section in position," he reported in. "Alright, everyone knows the drill. No holdups, no hesitation—shoot to kill."

Grunts of confirmations answered his directive, making Neville go for his communicator again. "This is A Section-Lead; all units in position. Initiate warding on my mark."

"Copy that, A Section-Lead. Warding to commence on your mark."

Neville glanced to his sides at the men following him into battle and reached out with one hand to his right. "Scope," he ordered.

Immediately, a collapsible periscope was give to him and he raised it just above the wall to scout out the area. So far, no activity had been seen from the house—but then that had been expected. Magical safe houses were a notable oddity in the magical world due precisely to the fact that they were sorely lacking in magical wards—it was the only way to hide it in plain sight. On the other hand, high-end safe houses, like the one his family had during the war against Voldemort, typically became hidden due to the sheer amount of magic poured into it. Both ways were valid, especially since the first one meant it was a lot harder to find the safe houses.

"Anything?" asked a Corporal at his side.

"Nothing yet," Neville replied as he scanned the face of the house for any signs of alertness. "I think we're clear," he added as he withdrew the periscope and went for his ear bud. "This is A-Section Lead to Wards; Mission is a go. Do your thing, lads."

"Roger that, A-Section Lead. Warding commencing."

Neville sat back and waited, counting up till ten, until he felt the wash of magical energy hit him. The Anti-Disapparation and Anti-Portkey wards had slammed into place. "They're up!" he called out. "Move, move, move!"

With practised fluidity, the members of Neville's section jumped the short garden wall and rushed the house, their weapons all aimed at the windows and doors in the event of suppressing fire. Just as they boots hit the pavement of the road, however, the side of the house exploded right around where the chimney had been.

"Charlie-Two-Four, reporting in; chimney has been destroyed."

"Charlie-Two-Lead moving in."

"Copy that, Charlie-Two-Lead, Fireteam Delta approaching rear door. No hostiles encountered."

Neville smiled grimly as he led his section towards the front of the house. "Fireteam Delta, on point. Fireteam Charlie, covering fire if necessary," he ordered. The two fireteam leaders in his section nodded as they jogged past him with their men and took their assigned positions.

That was when the first sounds of gunfire and spell explosions rang out.

"Charlie-Two-Lead, report in," Neville ordered. "Status."

"Hostiles encountered! Engaging!"

Neville looked back at his fireteam leaders and nodded. "Breach!"

The leader of Fireteam Delta nodded and took a few steps back from the door before taking a running start and kicking it in, assault rifle raised and firing the moment the soldier had eyes on a hostile target. He was soon followed in by a steady stream of his companions, all of them spreading throughout the house like the efficient predators they were trained to be.

Neville came in last, his steps into the house slow and deliberate as he listened to the gunfire and screams coming from every corner of the house. He absently kicked aside a fallen wand, its owner stuck in a perpetual expression of shocked despair as she lay in a pool of her own blood.

It was a scene mirrored throughout the house as the British soldiers eradicated every living thing in it, showing an atypical lack of mercy

even when begged to. Within moments, the soldiers had completed their mission, and were simply keeping watch in the various rooms for unexpected arrivals or survivors.

The leader of Fireteam Charlie of B Section was waiting for him at the foot of the staircase leading up to the next level. The man pulled up his snow-white balaclava before throwing up a salute. "Sir, all hostiles eliminated," he reported monotonously.

Neville observed the room around him—most of it had been destroyed by the RPG that B Section had shot at the chimney to prevent anyone escaping by way of Floo. "How many?" he asked.

"Altogether, two dozen mages," the man reported. "Most were on the second level—my men caught them waking up to the firefight."

Neville nodded. "Sounds about right," he said, comparing that figure with the one their intelligence had provided. He then clapped a hand on the man's shoulder in praise. "Good work, Sergeant."

"Sir!"

Neville sighed as he heard the call from one of the men at the front door. "And here comes part two," he mumbled to himself before turning around. "How many, soldier?"

"Fifteen and counting, sir! Just beyond the wards!" the soldier reported.

Neville swept out his arm. "Defensive positions!" he ordered with a shout. "Repel the mage reinforcements!"

Almost immediately, the house shook as the first of many similar offensive spells hit the abode. Interspersed with shouting and returning gunfire, the house became a scene of organized chaos as the soldiers moved from window to breach, to door, to window, and back to breach, returning fire with increasing numbers of mages as these tried to retake their safehouse, possibly under the assumption that their comrades might have been taken prisoner.

Among his men, Neville was not idle in the defence either. Moving from defender to defender, he used his magic to transfigure the ground or random objects into solid cover for his subordinates.

Neville instinctively ducked as he heard an explosion outside, and upon checking with his men, realized that the RPG team had managed to hit a group of overconfident mages successfully.

"Contacts rear!" he heard one of the defenders shout out in warning from the kitchen at the back. "Looks like twenty of them!"

"They're not fucking around, it seems," observed a nearby soldier grimly.

"They rarely do," Neville panned before absorbing the information and trying to plot out the best course of action, as Harry had instructed him to practice doing. The truth was, they were surrounded on all sides by incoming, determined opponents; his one trump card was that they seemed unaware of the fate of the inhabitants of the safehouse, so they weren't going all out. Perhaps it was time to use that to his advantage.

"Signal the warders to drop the anti-Disapparating ward," he ordered a soldier near the window. "Immediately."

"Sir?" questioned the sergeant from his fireteam.

Neville's hands lit up then, the magical energy coursing through his body and taking material shape as it accumulated at his appendages. While he was still nowhere near the level of ease with which Harry could wield powerful magic wandlessly, he was quickly catching up, and now was the time to show why he was Harry's right hand.

"Time to end this farce," he stated grimly, his expression stony and determined. "Signal the warders. Now," he repeated.

With a reluctant nod from the sergeant to encourage him, the soldier at the window dropped his assault rifle and pulled out a flare gun, aimed it through the window at the sky, and fired it, launching forth a blazing red signal flare that soared into the evening sky.

Neville kept his attention not on the flare, though, but the mages that were assaulting the house, all of whom remained outside of the ward limits. Good—as long as they didn't cross that threshold, they

would have no idea the wards had come down, giving Neville the advantage of surprise.

The moment he felt the wash of magic again, Neville knew it was time.

With a grunt and a thought, he popped out of existence, reappearing on top of the house, well outside the current field of vision of the attacking mages. Well, that was sort-of false. That any of them could easily see him went without question, but none of them was thinking of looking that high up, seeing as all the British defenders seemed to be focused on the first and second floors, and not an inch higher. Any whose eyes went a little higher were typically shot in the head by the British defenders for their lax guard.

As such, Neville reappeared atop the house without any resistance, his reappearance as silent as Apparation could possibly get, and was rewarded with a clear view of the raging battlefield around the house. He was thankful that none of the nearby residences were populated anymore, or else this would've been far more complicated than he'd have liked. As it stood, anyone in the outskirts of the city had pretty much moved towards the centre, where Harry's power was strongest. That was actually a factor in finding the safehouse to begin with—had it been placed deeper in Liverpool, they would've gone incognito for quite a while longer.

His unencumbered view made Neville smile in anticipation as he felt his magic course through his being, his hands extended at his sides as he prepared to write himself into the history books. When people spoke of Harry Potter's rise, they would in the same breath refer to him as the instrument of that rise.

Unfortunately, this wasn't one of those spells he could cast with a thought, and so Neville resorted to chanting the spell under his breath raising his hands to aim at the two groups that were advancing on the safe house, unaware of the doom that was about to be unleashed on them.

When he finished, Neville smiled viciously to himself, sweat starting to accumulate at his brow at the exertion his body was going through getting the impressive spell ready to fire. "My master's head is aching," he said, reminiscing of the comment Harry had made

after the ambush that had sparked this mission. "And here's the relief."

With a guttural howl, he let loose the magic from his hands, two blasts of green magic racing towards the ground in front of the attacking mages like meteors, catching them completely off guard. To their increasing surprise, nothing seemed to happen as the ground seemingly absorbed the magic, but now they were alerted to his presence on the roof and a couple of adventurous mages began firing at him, despite the suppressing fire from the house.

That ended moments later.

Earthen arms shot out from the ground and grabbed the mages by the legs, dragging many of them into the ground below or having their appendage torn clean off as earthen golems dug themselves out from the ground as though zombies straight out from a horror movie.

Cheers exploded from the house as the British defenders watched the earthen golems begin to rip through the mage offensive, quickly overwhelming the attackers with sheer weight of numbers. For every golem that fell to a spell-and they were quite easy to bring down, apparently-two more rushed forward to fill the gap, and it seemed that the terror wrought by the sudden onslaught had overriden the mages' logical recourse of Apparating away or using Portkeys, as neither of the groups were within the supposed range of the British wards.

The mages weren't all bad, however. Even as most of them fell to the golems, there seemed to be quite a few that managed to hold their own, apparently fighting to save as many of their comrades as they could. Nonetheless, Neville wasn't about to stand for that sort of thing, as he needed this operation done with quickly. Thus, he Disapparated from the rooftop and reappeared within the melee, quickly popping in and out of existence behind, in front, or even just to the side of a particularly dangerous mage and plunging a combat knife into their bodies at some particularly lethal spot.

Except for one case.

As he reached the end of his self-assigned kill list, he came across a mage that seemed unwilling to go down easily, blocking one of his

attempted stabs after another with a mixture of both amazing reflexes and quickly-summoned shield spells. It was quite impressive, truth be told, and Neville couldn't help but wonder who this mage was.

Until they finally managed to get into a deadlock and he got a good look at his face.

Neville grinned viciously. "Colin," he greeted.

The once-jovial Griffindor gave his erstwhile House companion a neutral, stony look. "Longbottom."

"I guess that answers the riddle of which Weasley, eh?" Neville noted before exerting some pressure and pushing himself away from the deadlock, sending a mental signal for the golems to rush Colin. To his utter lack of surprise now, Colin quickly dispatched the four that had complied with Neville's order in a sublime feat of magical prowess. "Only Ginny could ever order you around like this."

Colin ignored the comment, preferring to remain in a ready position, his wand at the ready. "I always thought the rumors of your demise were grossly exaggerated," he pointed out instead. "That op was too clean. Too perfect. Didn't think you'd work for Potter, though."

Neville smiled in self-assurance, also ready to renew his attacks. "The pay's good," he jibed. "And the benefits are amazing. Honestly, could you imagine Dumbledore ever giving you a good dental plan? Nevermind the Ministry!"

Colin made the first move, then. With an elegant, quick move of his wand, a rather fierce spell rushed at Neville, who smartly knew to dodge it by a slight movement of his torso and then launched himself at Colin, who had quickly grasped Neville's tactics and emulated them by popping out of existence and reappearing right behind the brown-haired commander.

Neville wasn't fazed, however, and merely smiled over his shoulder as he glimpsed Colin ready to fire a spell, the energy practically buzzing to life at the tip of his wand. "You know the problem with copying someone's move?" he asked with an excited smile.

Just as Colin fired the spell, Neville disappeared, prompting Colin to turn around and getting ready to kill his opponent. Only, Neville never showed up. Instead, Colin felt a hand being placed flat on the small of his back, and knew he'd miscalculated.

"You're never as good as the original," Neville finished. "Give your brother my regards."

"I will."

Neville barely had time to blink and spin to the side as a green jet of magic rushed past him and hit Colin. However, instead of crumbling to the ground dead-like, Colin's image fizzled out and was replaced by one of the mages who'd been previously killed in the initial advance.

Neville blinked in stupefaction at how close he'd come to dying, tricked as he was by the ingenious move from Colin. Ruthless, too, but then who was he to judge?

"Nice move," he praised as he kept his eyes trained on the genuine Colin Creevey, who was standing mere feet away from where Neville had been standing.

"I'm not so stupid as to fight you on even ground," Colin noted. "Not after you raised those golems."

"Smart man," Neville noted with a genuinely respectful smirk. "Too bad your comrades didn't think like that."

Colin braved a glance around him, only to see that Neville had been dead on with his commentary. As golems slowly advanced on him, Colin realized that he was the last mand standing from the assault on the safe house-a humiliating defeat, to be sure.

"Game over, Creevey," Neville stated calmly as he got up from his kneeling position and patted his pants down, a little irritated by all the dirt and blood he'd gotten onto them. "Surrender now and I promise you I'll vouch for you before Harry," he offered Colin as he straightened up. By now, even a couple of British soldiers had come out and had their assault rifles aimed at Colin's head.

Colin glanced at his surrounding enemies and gave Neville a defiant look. "And what? Join you?" he demanded. "I'd rather join my friends in death."

Neville sighed-for once actually regretting having to carry out Harry's order to the letter. Colin would've made a fine addition to the ranks. "Pity that," he panned before looking at the soldiers. "Shoot him."

Before they could, however, a black blur appeared amongst them, right in front of Colin, and Neville had only a fraction of a second to recognize the blur before it grabbed onto Colin and just as quickly disappeared, Colin in tow.

Left staring at the empty space in the cordon of British soldiers and golems, Neville smacked a hand to his face in exasperation. "Bloody hell," he muttered in frustration. "Harry's going to hate this."

Still, on the other hand, the mission had been largely a success-though this turn of events meant that their timeframe had shortened by quite a bit. Extending an arm towards one of the soldiers, Neville was quick to follow up with orders. "Get the message laid out inside the safe house," he ordered. "Have the troops then assemble for immediate extraction. We've got maybe fifteen minutes before a larger assault force gets here, so double time it, soldier!"

Realizing the urgency of the orders, the soldier gave the most curt of salutes before dashing back inside the house, where the subsequent din of activity began to sound out. The other soldier, not exactly designated to hurry, joined the rest inside the house at a trot, leaving Neville with his animated golems.

Neville's attention wasn't on the golems, however, but rather on his performance during the battle. Summoning the golems had taken quite a bit of exertion, concentration, and chanting, all of which had combined for a pretty abysmal lag time in terms of repeat usability in pitched combat. Harry, he knew, could summon the most dangerous of spells with but a snap of his fingers-fire spells being only part of the warlord's rather impressive knowledge of offensive spells.

His eyes fell on his left hand, which then tightened into a fist as his frustration threatened to get the best of him. He was still not good enough. As powerful as he was now, he was still walking in Harry's shadow, and that was unacceptable. While he did not envy the

man's ambition for absolute power, Neville hated being made into a footnote. He would carve his place in the history books one day, cementing his position as the most powerful and dangerous military mage in Harry's army.

Then, and only then would he be satisfied.

Manchester, United Kingdom, December 20th, 2011…

Actions have consequences.

It is the eternal, ironclad law of the universe that governs all history, all evolution. It has its good incarnations and bad incarnations.

Harry's vengeance on the Order of the Phoenix was no exception.

Within five days of the strike against the Order safe house, the central government in London lost all control of Manchester as panicked anti-magic fanatics, spooked by the devastation Neville had unleashed and the ambush that had sparked the strike, seized control of the government buildings and all but chased out any armed support for London.

A day later, word filtered through that Leeds and Sheffield had similarly broken off from the central authority, followed a day later by Exeter down south and Cardiff, where the rioting that chased out the central authority had apparently been extraordinarily violent.

Of course, none of this sat very well with the Chiefs of Staff, who saw this as a direct attack on their power, regents or not for the legitimate civilian government. Thus, their retaliatory strikes against the southern rebellions were quick and decisive, and within forty-eight hours of their start, Cardiff and Exeter had been regained.

The north, however, was proving a more harrowing task. With their control on the fringes of Britain severely diminished—almost nonexistent as one crossed into Scotland—the Chiefs of Staff were unable to quell the uprisings in Leeds and Manchester, and had to resort to the one option they truly, veritably despised.

They ordered Harry Potter to do it.

Thus it was that on December 20th, merely ten days after the uprisings had begun, the forces under the command of Harry Potter, dubbed Northern Command, rolled over to Manchester on the backs of tanks and at the sound of jackboots hitting concrete.

"I still can't believe they actually tipped you for this operation."

Harry put down his binoculars to give an amused smile at his companion atop the military Humvee they'd procured for their transportation. "Such little faith, Speirs," he commented with a chuckle before raising his binoculars back up and staring at the smoking city of Manchester. His troops had done well to surround the city's main access points, and even as the tanks rolled up the main highway, he knew this operation, if he carried it out quickly and successfully, would further play into his agenda.

"Seriously," Speirs insisted as he lit up a cigarette and breathed in the nicotine deeply. "Couldn't they have just sent one of their cronies, even if just as a titular head?"

"Not likely," Harry pointed out, observing the scurrying of the rebel forces as they dug in for the impending assault. "The Chiefs of Staff are on thin ice as it is, and they damn well know it. Manchester, Leeds, Exeter…this is their worst nightmare come true, especially since it's on the fringes of the country."

"Scotland's farther."

"Scotland's a lost cause, and anyone with a brain knows it," Harry retorted before addressing an orderly standing next to the Humvee. "Six defensive positions on the main highway approach. Mark targets for future bombardment."

"Seven. Missed the one on the rooftop of the left brick building," Speirs corrected.

"Seven," Harry agreed after a pause, confirming Speirs' observation. He briefly put down the glasses to give his companion a pleased smile. "Nice catch."

"I don't wear these for nothing, you know," Speirs answered wryly as he tapped his Lieutenant General's insignia.

"Seven positions," the orderly confirmed. "Targets marked."

"Status on detached forces," Harry ordered.

The orderly held up a hand for a moment as he relayed the order, leaving the two men in silence as they waited…until Harry spoke up again.

"Scotland's become the playground of the mage factions," he informed Speirs. "Checked the news lately? Thousands of refugees crossing the Glasgow-Edinburgh line every day."

"It's a damn disgrace, is what it is," Speirs opined with a grunt, pulling his large overcoat tighter against the cold. "And you won't act against them," he half-heartedly accused.

"With what?" Harry challenged patiently. "And to what end? So we can lose and let the Chiefs of Staff swallow everything we've worked to achieve?" he asked. "It's not just about numbers, Speirs, or equipment. It's about support, logistics, and power. We've got the former two, but not the rest. We march into Scotland right now? They'd bunker down in that valley of theirs so hard the siege to take it would take years. Years," he repeated for effect. "You know we don't have the supply base for that sort of massive operation."

"So instead of breaking mage skulls, we're pointing our guns at our own," Speirs muttered a little resentfully, motioning towards the burning city of Manchester. Even in the absurd cold of Northern English winter, the fires in some of the city's quarters were still burning strong.

Harry gave an understanding, sad smile. "It's unfortunate, but it's what we've got to do," he said before the orderly caught his eye. "Go on."

The orderly saluted before giving his report, his breath visible due to the cold. "All fronts report full readiness, sir," the orderly stated. "The military mages want to know where to deploy to."

Harry shared a glance with Speirs before shaking his head. "Military mages to stand down," he ordered. "Only Wenshi's strike group is to take position, as planned," he added. "No sense leveling one of our own cities if we can avoid it."

"Yes, sir!"

The two generals fell back into comfortable silence for a moment, before Speirs decided he couldn't take it anymore. "It's a good plan," he commented. "Quick, simple…minimal killing."

"Let's hope it stays that way," Harry replied with a grim look as he raised his binoculars. "Plans have a way of falling apart rather quickly." He fell silent again for a minute before nodding to himself. "Give the order."

Speirs gave a firm nod and brought up his radio transmitter. "This is General Speirs to all units: Operation Anvil is a go!"

Leeds, United Kingdom, December 24th, 2011…

It was Christmas Eve, and the North was all but under the command of Harry Potter.

Operation Anvil, the plan to retake Manchester in a military blitz on the rebel headquarters and city utilities, had been a resounding success, seeing the strike team under the command of Neville Longbottom, codenamed Wenshi, successfully Portkey right in the midst of the City Council, successfully capturing the entire rebel leadership in one swift stroke.

Wracked by the chaos of an absent leadership, the defensive positions had quickly fallen to the British regulars as they moved quickly to retake the city, achieving this goal in record time as they spread every which way like a raging river. By the time the whole operation had concluded, only five British servicemen had died, with two of these being due to tripping an improvised explosive device at one of the power plants.

By comparison, the rebel forces had sustained severe casualties, losing about five hundred armed militia who had refused to budge from their positions. Impressed by their courage, the British forces saw to it that their bodies were retrieved and given to their families for burial.

The rebel leadership, however, was not so lucky.

Enraged by the two-fold humiliation of having lost control of the North and having been forced to ask Harry Potter to deal with it, the Chiefs of Staff had decreed the death penalty for all of the rebel leaders against the protests of the Houses of Parliament. Sirius and Joshua, in particular, had been vocal about their disagreement, but all that had achieved was a swift dismissal from the Chiefs of Staff.

Leeds was next, and fell just as quickly before the innovative tactics of the Mage General.

This time deploying several strike teams based on the same model as the one Neville had led in Manchester, Operation Hammer succeeded beyond everyone's wildest expectations when it was reported that no casualties had been sustained vis-à-vis the loss of twenty rebels and the capture of their leadership. The rest, upon hearing of the devastating strike, surrendered quickly.

Again, the Chiefs ordered the deaths of all captured rebels, and again Sirius and Joshua protested on Harry's "behalf." Still, they were dismissed out of hand, calling Harry and his supporters too soft.

Again, they had played into Harry's hands.

Helped along by Sirius and Joshua, leaks began to sprout regarding the Chiefs of Staff's brutal behavior towards prisoners of war, garnering public outrage. As details of the Chiefs of Staff's orders to execute the leadership without due trial emerged, riots intensified across the country, weakening their already tenuous grasp on the country's stability.

"Five more cities have broken off ties to London today," Xenophilius reported as he stood, clutching an electronic pad with the pertinent information displayed, before his assembled audience. "Norwich, Stoke, Birmingham, Luton, and Milton," he elaborated before tapping a few times on his new toy. "Plus an additional thirteen smaller settlements. All in all, London's effective control of the country has decayed to about forty percent."

"Just in time for Christmas," Speirs noted dryly as he downed a shot of hard liquor.

"Heck, it's even less if you realize they only control the north because of us," Neville pointed out, his feet tapping the floor rapidly. "The Chiefs are done."

"It wouldn't do well for us to underestimate them," Xeno pointed out. "Even bloodied, they still command the loyalty of thousands of troops, and they're not idiots by any means in terms of warfare. Exeter was proof of that."

"They still lost it again, though," General Curtis, who had flown in from London, reminded the mage. "That gutless worm Taylor loses his temper too easily, and Thompson isn't much better," she opined. "It'd be a matter of pushing their buttons to get them to lose whatever skill they have."

"Hughes has the fleet, though—he could pose a problem," Alfred Hughes, Harry's old intelligence adjutant from the Anglo-Spanish War, brought up. "Unless we've managed to convince enough in the Admiralty to stand with us?"

Xeno shook his head. "Only the Northerners have shown any semblance of agreement. Not enough to go toe-to-toe with the Navy."

He was about to continue speaking when a knock interrupted him, causing all eyes to go towards the door of the old City Council conference room. "Come in," Xeno said.

Perfectly professional, a young woman in uniform came in and handed Xeno a small slip of paper before saluting Speirs, Curtis, Hughes, and Harry, the last of whom had been quietly listening to the discussion at the head of the table. "Sirs," she greeted.

Speirs and Hughes gave sloppy salutes back, while Curtis and Harry gave the young woman the return she deserved. Either way, she was gone within the next few seconds, leaving the assembled audience to look back at Xeno for information.

"Belfast is lost," he reported. "Rebel forces finally captured the city about ten minutes ago. The Irish Republic's armies are sitting on the international border, just in case." he added after he checked his watch and matched it with the document's timestamp.

Neville whistled, his anxious foot tapping finally halting. "That's Northern Ireland lost, then."

Xeno nodded. "Indeed. Effective control at about thirty-five percent now," he corrected his initial estimate. He then looked straight at Harry. "With all due respect, Harry, but isn't it time? This country is about a small sneeze away from descending into absolute anarchy."

"I agree with the wand waver," Curtis spoke up, leaning forward as she turned her chair to face Harry, and totally ignoring Xenophilius' indignant look. "We've waited long enough. Everything south of the Glasgow-Edinburgh Line and North of Sheffield is under our control, and the Chiefs have never been weaker! Now is the perfect time to strike!"

"The Air Force is with us," Speirs added to Curtis' voice. "Or, at least, a decent portion of them are. Thompson's been alienating anyone with Northern background, and the rest have been deserting to help out back home," he stated. "Air and land superiority. Should be a breeze."

"You're drunk," Harry observed neutrally. "How much have you had to drink?"

Speirs made a point not to answer until he drank another shot of hard liquor in one go. "Not bloody well enough," he grumbled. "S'not bloody right. Never signed up to kill my own bloody people."

"Man up, Speirs," Curtis chastised her colleague before looking over to Harry again. "Whatever his drama, he's right on one thing—we've got military superiority on land and in the air. Now's the time to take those arrogant pricks down!"

Hughes, who had been patiently listening to Curtis and Speirs' opinions, then nodded along. "I agree," he weighed in. Unfortunately, he didn't seem willing to share anything else, leaving the rest to wonder what had been the clinching argument in his mind.

"The military mages are ready," Xeno added as he brought up the pertinent information on his screen. "Lupin reports that at least fifty more mages are ready for combat under the new, Leeds-class operational guidelines." Xeno then shrugged his shoulders. "It's an overwhelming force, Harry. Never been a better time to act on this."

Harry folded his hands in front of him and leaned forward on the table, his brows furrowed as he gave serious consideration to the counsel of his colleagues. Militarily, they were correct—the north was in excellent shape thanks to his quick and clean operations that had suppressed any rebellion, and the efforts of his administration in rectifying the food shortages. A temporary freeze on the prices had also helped to settle the runaway inflation problems, but unless they managed to unify the country within the year, the whole of the United Kingdom, his holdings included, would devolve into a barter economy, especially with words of additional trade embargoes from the French, and the silence of the Americas.

Yet, Harry hadn't reached this level of power on careless confidence. How many years had he sacrificed waiting for the right opportunities?

"It's not just about force," Harry reminded his colleagues, clasping his hands before him as he leaned onto the table. "However much power we have behind us, we are still only a legitimate force in the north. Should we march into London, we may certainly retain the city, but there's no guarantee the rest of the country will follow suit."

The group before him fell into silence, glancing at each other nervously as they realized their leader had a point. While Harry's reputation in the north was nigh unassailable in the eyes of the public, he was still just another war hero in the central and southern regions of the United Kingdom. As much as Liverpool would back him up on anything, he didn't have that guarantee with Oxford, Canterbury, or any other of the southern cities.

"Furthermore," Harry continued, seeing as how no one had protested yet, "we have no guarantees that any foreign force will not interfere in the event that we do march on London," he pointed out. "Xeno, what's the word on France and the Yanks?"

Xeno coughed once to clear his throat before bringing up the relevant data on his touchpad. "Remus reports that France is on full military alert," he started, making many a military man in the room stiffen with worry before continuing. "But it's not due to us. There's been reports of German mages skirmishing with French border patrols. They seem to think the Germans are trying to provoke something."

"Are they?" asked Curtis.

Xeno shook his head. "Most likely, it's the work of refugee smugglers who got caught in the attempt," he analyzed as he read the information related to the cases in question. "Frankly, with the—pardon the pun—witch hunts the French have organized, I'm surprised it's not worse."

"And the Yanks?" Harry veered the conversation back to the focal problem in their plans.

"They've got their own mess to sort out," Xeno informed the group as he used his fingers to navigate the fantastic gadget. Honestly, how had he lived without technology? "They've got some issues with fundamentalists practically up in arms against the mages, but they're also more preoccupied with the situation in Latin America, where the racial feuds are a lot more brutal."

"So the two major concerns will probably just stand by," Albert summed up.

Speirs shrugged. "Leaving legitimacy still in the air…g'luck trying to get that done in a week," he grumbled as he downed another shot.

"Is that a dare?"

Practically everyone in the room went for a weapon—be it pistol or wand—as the new voice intruded on their conversation. Each person turning their head towards the doorway, they were all surprised to see a somewhat haggard Joshua Warwick standing there, with Sirius at his side not looking much better.

"Joshua, Sirius," Harry greeted them as he stood up, looking somewhat surprised. "You're supposed to be in London."

"Change of plans," Sirius said with a grimace as he flinched when his shoulder made slight contact with the doorway.

Joshua, meanwhile, kept his attention on Speirs. "Was that a dare, Speirs?" the nobleman asked with a weak smirk. "Because I'll take that action—full legitimacy for our coup in one day."

Speirs' eyebrows were not the only ones to rise at this bold proclamation. "Big words. Back them up, Warwick," the somewhat drunken officer challenged.

Joshua gave a weak, triumphant smile as he dug into his rather torn coat and brought out a scrap of paper. "The King has fled London," he announced. "And I know where he is."

Chp9